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# ALBERT OF BELGIUM

The Defence of Right

By

EMILE CAMMAERTS

FEW monarchs in their lifetimes have aroused such intense enthusiasm as the late King Albert of Belgium, who, when the hosts of Germany threatened his little country, rallied his people, and placing himself at the head, opposed every inch of the enemy's progress. The world has waited these many years for a full and authoritative biography of King Albert, and at last the ideal biographer has been found in M. Emile Cammaerts, the most distinguished Belgian poet and critic. M. Cammaerts opens his story with an intensely dramatic description of the outbreak of the Great War, and then harks back to the boyhood of King Albert, his succession, education and early days as monarch.

It should be added that the book is fully illustrated by sketches, autograph letters and a series of unpublished photographs kindly lent by Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth.

This is not only one of the indispensable books on the Great War ; it is a fascinating and intimate study of a brave-souled, able monarch, who rallied the world to his side.



ALBERT OF BELGIUM

*Defender of Right*



ALBERT  
OF BELGIUM  
DEFENDER OF RIGHT

BY  
EMILE CAMMAERTS

1935

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## Preface

A NUMBER of books on King Albert have been published since February 1934, but none of them deals or claims to deal with the subject in all its aspects.

A comprehensive biography based on all official documents cannot be written for many years to come, but sufficient material is already available to give an outline of the Sovereign's career, as a statesman and a military leader. With regard to his private life and personality, there is a great deal of information scattered in Belgian publications, based to a certain extent on oral tradition. It seems essential that this information should be collected and checked, whenever possible, by reliable witnesses before it is too late to do so.

The author's aim has not merely been to gather all that has been said and written about King Albert for the benefit of the English reading public. He has taken great pains to sift his evidence and to eliminate doubtful statements. The late King remarked, on more than one occasion, that many sayings attributed to Leopold II were apocryphal. Popular imagination has been still more active concerning his own words and actions. In some cases these legends are so suggestive that they cannot be entirely ignored, but whenever they are mentioned the reader is duly warned of their true character.

Among those who gave the author the benefit of their personal knowledge and experience are M. Wodon, *Secrétaire d'Etat de la Maison du Roi*; Comte Guillaume de Grunne, *Grand Maître de la Maison de Sa Majesté la Reine Elisabeth*; and Colonel Van Overstraeten, King Leopold's *officier d'Ordonnance*, and formerly King Albert's *aide-de-camp*. Without their help and that of several British and Belgian friends and correspondents, no critical study of the subject would have been possible.

While expressing his sincere gratitude to all concerned, the author wishes to say that he remains entirely responsible for the statements made and opinions expressed in the course of the following chapters. In all matters connected with this work he has acted independently, following, rightly or wrongly, his own judgement. His sole purpose has been to give a full and faithful account of King Albert's actions and of the circumstances and personal motives which prompted them.

The late King's life was so intimately bound up with that of the Belgian nation that his biography is also the history of his reign. It is therefore hoped that the present work will be of some interest to the student as well as to the ordinary reader. If some of its conclusions seem premature, the author can only quote in self-defence a few lines written, on the morrow of King Albert's death, by a Belgian historian, Vicomte Terlinden: "Through a unique privilege, the King whose death we lament with the whole civilized world belongs already to history. His life has been so clear, his purpose so straight and loyal, that a judgement on his reign need not be deferred."<sup>1</sup>

Had King Albert's outlook been less transparent and consistent, his actions and motives less plain and simple, the present biography would have been unwarranted. We do not yet know all he has done, but we know already what he could not have done. We cannot yet follow all his steps along the road, but we are in no doubt about their direction.

"The characteristic of heroism," wrote Emerson, "is its persistency."

E. C.

*August 1935.*

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

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\* *These photographs, hitherto unpublished, belong to Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth's private collection and are reproduced by her kind permission.*

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*The three first sketches are based on the maps published in General Galer's book "Albert, King of the Belgians, in the Great War."*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Night of August 2nd, 1914

(1) BRUSSELS, that summer Sunday, looked particularly happy. The fine weather had caused the usual flow of trippers to the neighbouring countryside. Trains and trams—motors were still scarce in those days—leading to the Forêt de Soignes towards Tervueren and Waterloo were crowded to overflowing. The town itself was not deserted, for crowds of peasants and provincials had taken this opportunity of paying a visit to the Capital, strolling through the Grand' Place or hailing each other across the boulevards. The cafés were busy quenching the thirst of the people, and the children lately released from school took a lively share in the general merriment.

Prospects were good. Tradespeople congratulated themselves on their profits, and even the farmers, gratified by a record crop, refrained from uttering their usual complaints. The political struggle between Socialists and Conservatives pursued its normal course, but the agitation for universal suffrage, which had culminated in the general strike of 1913, had lost a great deal of its bitterness. It was generally felt that the worst was over and that a satisfactory solution of social and linguistic difficulties was within sight.

Those who troubled their heads about international affairs—a small minority in those days of complacent neutrality—were vaguely aware of a crisis. The ultimatum sent by Austria to Serbia on July the 23rd, followed five days later by the declaration of war, had caused a certain stir, and the military preparation going on in Germany and France were somewhat disturbing, but these were considered as mere precautions. There had been other crises in recent years, Tangiers, Algeciras, Agadir, which

had been successfully overcome, in spite of the forebodings of the pessimists. Neither did the mobilization of the Belgian Army, started two days previously, trouble the equanimity of the ordinary citizen. On the contrary, the movement of troops added new interest to the holiday mood of the crowd. Supposing the conflict were to spread to Western Europe, Belgium would at worst be obliged to guard her frontiers—as in 1870. England would once more keep a stern watch over her neutrality. Those who had glanced through their newspapers in the morning, had learnt with some indignation that the Germans had seized the railways of the neutralized Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, and occupied the Capital; but even this news did not seriously shake their confidence. The measure might be merely defensive and its scope was no doubt limited. Luxemburg was on the direct road to France, and its neutrality was not built on such solid foundations as that of Belgium.

For the vast majority, no cloud darkened the bright holiday sky. The usual picnics took place, children gathered flowers, women gossiped, men drank their beer and smoked their Sunday cigar with solemn relish. Towards the evening, tired and happy, the Luxemburg incident entirely forgotten, the Serbian War dismissed from their minds, the people flocked back to town and joined their provincial compatriots in the cafés.

M. de Bassompierre, an official at the Belgian Foreign Office, who had rushed to a restaurant of the Place Royale to take a hurried and belated dinner, watched them with amazement: “I remember,” he writes, “the strange impression made upon me by the brilliantly lighted room and the distress with which I looked upon the guests sitting at the neighbouring tables. They knew nothing, they had read their evening papers containing the reassuring declaration made that same morning by the German Minister in Brussels . . . they were happy and free from care . . . I was crushed by the weight of what I knew, of the secret which would be revealed the next day, and

which would give such a cruel awakening to those who surrounded me. Was I the victim of a nightmare? . . ." <sup>1</sup>

This secret was the German ultimatum delivered an hour before to the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

(2) The placid mood of the Belgian people had not been shared by the officials of the Foreign Office, who realized from the first that the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia might jeopardize the country's security.

From July the 23rd, foreseeing the danger to which Belgium was exposed, they had eagerly considered the various circumstances under which a violation of the treaties of 1839 might occur. A number of notes on the subject had been prepared some years before. To the Belgian diplomats of pre-war days, a cynical violation of the treaties devoid of all legal excuse seemed indeed unlikely. They discussed the attitude to be taken in case of unwarranted invasion by Germany, France or England (and no distinction was made between the three Powers), and they also dealt with more complex problems. What would happen, for instance, in case of simultaneous invasions from two or more sides, each invader accusing the other of having ignored his obligations and justifying his own attitude by the necessity of parrying the blow? Such academic discussions, however, were soon to be swept away by a succession of alarming events.

On July 28th, a telegram from Comte Dudzeele, the Belgian Minister in Vienna, announced the declaration of war by Austria-Hungary to Serbia. The same evening, the ministerial Council, over which King Albert presided, resolved to place the army on a "strengthened peace footing," that is to say, to provide it with effectives similar to the forces maintained normally, in time of peace, by other nations in frontier areas.

On July 31st, the Government was informed that a state of "Danger of War" (*Kriegsgefahr*) had been proclaimed

<sup>1</sup> "La nuit du 2 au 3 août, 1914."

in Germany and that Holland was arming. The Council ordered general mobilization to start on August 1st at midnight. The same evening, Sir Francis Villiers, the British Minister in Brussels, explained to the Foreign Minister, M. Davignon, the steps taken by Sir Edward Grey to ascertain the intentions of France and Germany with regard to Belgian neutrality. Meanwhile, Baron van der Elst<sup>1</sup> had called on the German Minister in Brussels in order to obtain further information. He reminded Herr von Below of the declaration made in 1911 by the German Chancellor through his Minister in Brussels: Germany had no intention of violating Belgian neutrality, but a public declaration to that effect would weaken her military situation. Baron van der Elst also alluded to the statement made in 1913 by Herr von Jagow before the Budget Commission of the Reichstag, recognizing the treaties of 1839. The German Minister answered that personally he was convinced that the feelings of his country towards Belgium remained unaltered.

On August 1st, in the morning, M. Klobukowski, the French Minister in Brussels, declared to M. Davignon that the Government of the Republic would respect Belgian neutrality, thus confirming the French answer to Sir Edward Grey's Note of the previous day. Reassured on this side, the Belgian Foreign Minister sent once more to the German Legation in order to inform Herr von Below of the French answer and give him an opportunity of making the intentions of his Government better known. The German Minister remained non-committal, but reiterated his opinion that Belgium had nothing to fear from Germany.

On August 2nd, the very day on which the ultimatum was delivered, Herr von Below repeated this statement to M. Davignon himself and, questioned by a representative of the *Soir*, indulged in a picturesque metaphor: "Your neighbour's roof will perhaps burn, but your house will be saved." Was it an allusion to the future fate of France, or perhaps to that of Luxemburg which had already been

<sup>1</sup> Secretary-General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

occupied by German troops early that morning? It must be stated, in all fairness, that Herr von Below might have been sincere. The ultimatum had been sent to him, it is true, on July 29th, but he had been ordered not to break the seal of the envelope before being instructed to communicate its contents to the Belgian Government. It is more difficult to explain the reason which prompted the German Military Attaché in Brussels to answer the inquiries of the editor of the *vingtième Siècle*, made on the same day, by denying that Germany had declared war on Russia, and that German troops had entered the Grand Duchy.

The Belgian authorities were in no doubt, by that time, as to the failure of the efforts made to prevent or limit the conflagration. Germany was already at war with Russia, and the occupation of Luxemburg made it plain that a conflict with France was imminent. But there was still a chance that, owing to British pressure upon the belligerents, Belgian neutrality would be respected as it had been in 1870. Germany had given, as a pretext for her invasion of Luxemburg, the necessity of securing the railways which she exploited in that country, against a possible attack by the French. Would she provoke British hostility, add to the number of her enemies, and challenge world opinion by violating Belgian territory?

The answer was soon to come. At about 7.20 p.m. Herr von Below called on M. Davignon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After handing him the German ultimatum, he briefly outlined its proposals and retired, after ten minutes, without further comment. Baron de Gaiffier, *Directeur de la Politique*, and his collaborators, had been warned of the visit, and rushed to M. Davignon's study. They found him holding a paper in his hand:

"It is bad, very bad," said the Minister, who was extremely pale, "here is the German Note . . . they demand that we give free passage to the Army."

—And what did you say?

—I took the paper and said that I would examine it,

with the King and my colleagues. We have twelve hours in which to answer. But I was unable to refrain from expressing my indignation. I told Herr von Below that we could have expected anything but this: Germany, who pretended to be our devoted friend, urging dishonour upon us! Let us translate quickly and call M. de Broqueville."<sup>1</sup>

"I sat down at the ministerial desk," writes M. de Bassompierre, "while Comte d'Ursel and Baron de Gaiffier took the German Note and began to translate it. I wrote under their dictation. M. Davignon and the Secretary-General, seated on either side of the mantelpiece, followed our work anxiously. All this scene is for ever engraved on my memory: the expression on the faces of the listeners, the thoughts which jostled each other in my mind, the very paper on which I was writing in French, the text of the ultimatum. I shall never, I believe, forget a single one of these details."

The work was not yet finished when the Prime Minister entered the room. M. Davignon immediately reported to him his interview with Herr von Below. When the translation was completed the French text was read aloud:

*Reliable information has been received by the German Government to the effect that French forces intend to march on the line of the Meuse by Givet and Namur. This information leaves no doubt as to the intention of France to march through Belgian territory against Germany.*

*The German Government cannot but fear that Belgium, in spite of the utmost goodwill, will be unable, without assistance, to repel so considerable a French invasion with sufficient prospect of success to afford an adequate guarantee against danger to Germany. It is essential for the self-defence of Germany that she should anticipate any such hostile attack. The German Government would, however, feel the deepest regret if*

<sup>1</sup> The Belgian Prime Minister and Minister of War.

*Belgium regarded as an act of hostility against herself the fact that the measures taken by Germany's opponents force Germany, for her own protection, to enter Belgian territory.*

*In order to exclude any possibility of misunderstanding, the German Government make the following declaration:*

(1) *Germany has in view no act of hostility against Belgium. In the event of Belgium being prepared in the coming war to maintain an attitude of friendly neutrality towards Germany, the German Government bind themselves, at the conclusion of peace, to guarantee the possessions and independence of the Belgian Kingdom in full.*

(2) *Germany undertakes, under the above-mentioned condition, to evacuate Belgian territory on the conclusion of peace.*

(3) *If Belgium adopts a friendly attitude, Germany is prepared, in co-operation with the Belgian authorities, to purchase all necessaries for her troops against a cash payment, and to pay an indemnity for any damage that may have been caused by German troops.*

(4) *Should Belgium oppose the German troops, and in particular should she throw difficulties in the way of their march by a resistance of the fortresses on the Meuse, or by destroying railways, roads, tunnels, or other similar works, Germany will, to her regret, be compelled to consider Belgium as an enemy.*

*In this event, Germany can undertake no obligations towards Belgium, but the eventual adjustment of the relations between the two States must be left to the decision of arms.*

*The German Government, however, entertain the distinct hope that this eventuality will not occur, and that the Belgian Government will know how to take the necessary measures to prevent the occurrence of incidents such as those mentioned. In this case the*

*friendly ties which bind the two neighbouring States will grow stronger and more enduring.*

A long silence followed. The meaning of the document was only too plain. According to Belgian information, and to the definite declaration of the French Government, the suspicions expressed in the first paragraph served merely as a pretext for the German demand. The allusion to the line of the Meuse left no doubt as to the extent of the projected military movements. Germany intended to use the road from Liège to Namur under the silenced guns of the very forts which she had urged Belgium to build in 1887. As to the promises made in paragraphs 1, 2 and 3, they were nullified by the blatant threat contained in paragraph 4. Besides, what value could be attached to such engagements made by a Power who entirely ignored the formal and solemn treaties concluded in 1839, confirmed in 1870, and strengthened by a score of public declarations made recently by the Emperor himself and his ministers?

It has since been disclosed that the text of the ultimatum had been prepared as early as July 26th—on the morrow of the Serbian reply to Austria-Hungary—by General von Moltke, the German Chief of Staff. In this first draft, Belgium was promised territorial compensation at the expense of France, and an allusion was made to an impending Franco-British invasion of Belgian territory. Herr von Below, in his last instructions, had been ordered to shorten the duration of the ultimatum from twenty-four to twelve hours, and to add a suggestion which appeared particularly ominous: the Belgian Government was advised to retire to Antwerp and to allow the German authorities to deal with any trouble which might arise in the Capital.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of relief felt in Belgian diplomatic circles after the first shock brought by the ultimatum was over, strange as it may appear, was not without some foundation. “The situation was clear,” writes M. de Bassompierre.

<sup>1</sup> L. Leclère: *La Belgique et l'Allemagne du 26 juillet au 4 août 1914.*

"It lent itself neither to hesitation nor to interpretation." Under certain circumstances, Belgium might have been obliged to appreciate the motives which prompted her guarantor's actions and to choose between two belligerents who had penetrated her territory, or she might have been driven into a futile struggle against two or three Powers through strict adherence to the letter of the law. Now, the case was plain. On one side, the French Ministers' declaration of July 31st, officially confirmed the next day, stating that in case of international conflict the Government of the Republic would respect Belgian neutrality; on the other, an unequivocal demand, accompanied by threats, to allow German troops to enter Belgian territory, a demand based not even on a supposed breach by France of her obligations, but on her presumed intention of breaking them.

The silence was at last broken by Baron van der Elst who asked the question which was in every mind—"Are we ready?" M. de Broqueville who had remained throughout quite calm, answered slowly: "Yes, we are ready. Mobilization, started yesterday morning, is almost completed. To-morrow the army will be able to move, but we have not yet received our heavy guns."

The time was then ten minutes past eight. It was decided that the King must be warned without delay, and asked to summon a Ministerial Council at nine o'clock. The Prime Minister left at once for the Royal Palace.

(3) "The King must be warned." In order to understand the full meaning of these words it is necessary to realize the peculiar position occupied by the Crown according to the terms of the Belgian Constitution, and the personal part played by King Albert in preparing his country for the ordeal with which she was so suddenly confronted.

The Belgian Constitution of 1831 was a compromise between the democratic principles of the French Revolution of 1789 and the principles of Constitutional Monarchy, as practised in England in the first years of the nineteenth

century. The King's power was strictly limited, and no decision of his was legally valid unless countersigned by a responsible minister. The Executive was subordinated to the Legislature, and every precaution was taken to prevent the Sovereign from sheltering from the law any too compliant minister. Indeed, the Constitution was considered so liberal at the time that, when urged to accept the Belgian Crown in 1831, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg showed a marked reluctance to assume responsibilities which seemed out of proportion to the power which he would be allowed to exercise.

One feature of the Constitution, however, considerably enhanced the King's position. He was placed at the head of the army and undertook, on ascending the throne, not only to respect the liberties of the people, but also to preserve the country's independence and territorial integrity. This justified his intervention in the conduct of international affairs, and more particularly in all matters concerning military defence. One of the principal reasons which induced the Belgian Congress of 1830 to vote for Constitutional Monarchy against the wishes of its republican members, was that this form of government would provide Belgium with an efficient shield against the ambitions of her neighbours.

Leopold I made the most of these opportunities. He placed himself at the head of the troops during the Ten Days' Campaign against Holland, on the morrow of his accession to the throne, entirely reorganized the national army, and exerted a great influence in Foreign Affairs, owing to the personal relations which he cultivated in almost every European Court. Leopold II undertook the same task, under difficult circumstances, for the fortunate experience of 1870 had given his people an unbounded faith in the guarantee of neutrality, and a false sense of security, which prompted them to oppose the King's constant efforts to strengthen the country's military position.

When King Albert ascended the throne, in December

1909, he inherited these powers and these responsibilities, and remained faithful to the tradition of the dynasty, watching carefully the international situation, and using all his influence to improve the army and perfect its plan of defence. Owing to his patient energy, and thanks to his increasing popularity, he almost succeeded in providing his country with a defensive force sufficiently strong to stem a surprise aggression. The only point which needs emphasizing, at this stage, is the prestige which King Albert enjoyed in Belgian military and diplomatic circles. His moral authority asserted itself after his visit to Potsdam, in October 1913, when he used the information which he had gathered from his interviews with William II and General von Moltke to convince Belgian Statesmen of the critical situation in which the country might be placed, and of the urgent need of preparing for it. The passing of the military law of 1913, in spite of the stubborn resistance of the anti-militarist party, was considered not only as a political achievement for M. de Broqueville, but also as a personal success for the King.

The Royal Palace and the Ministries of War and Foreign Affairs were, during this period, in constant contact. They are, in fact, only separated by a small "Parc," which is scarcely more than a glorified square planted with old elm trees, in the formal style of French classical garden architecture. Every important piece of news which reached the Foreign Office during the week preceding the ultimatum had been transmitted to the King and had only confirmed his serious misgivings. The efforts made a few months before by the Kaiser and the German Chief of Staff to impress upon him the danger of resistance and the advisability of joining the stronger side, had prepared him for the worst. The delay and evasiveness of the German answer to Sir Edward Grey's inquiry, regarding the respect of Belgian neutrality, appeared to him so alarming that he did not hesitate to write a personal letter to William II in order to obtain some definite assurances. Though doubtful concerning the sup-

posed reluctance on the part of Germany to inform the French of her military intentions, he wished to provide the Kaiser with an opportunity of giving him satisfactory, if confidential, information. This letter, dated August 1st, coincided with the inquiries made by Belgian Foreign Office officials at the German Legation:

SIRE AND DEAR COUSIN,

The war which threatens to break out between the two neighbouring Powers causes me, as you will understand, the greatest anxiety.

For the eighty odd years of Belgium's independence, our country has conscientiously observed her international obligations, on more than one occasion in the most difficult circumstances, and the Chancellor of the Empire paid the highest tribute to her correct and impartial attitude in 1870.

Your Majesty and your Government have, on many occasions given us signal proofs of friendship and sympathy, and we have received from the highest sources the assurance that in the event of another conflict the neutrality of Belgium would be respected.

We understand perfectly the political objections which militate against the publication of such a declaration, but we do not imagine for a moment that the feelings and intentions of the powerful Empire, over which Your Majesty holds sway, have undergone any change with regard to ourselves.

The bonds of kinship and friendship, which so closely unite our two families, have prompted me to write to you and beg you at this critical time to renew the expression of these sentiments towards my country.

I shall be deeply grateful to you for this favour, and confident of obtaining it,

I remain,

Always your devoted cousin,

ALBERT.

The letter had not yet been answered when the Prime Minister reached the Palace with the fatal news. The King merely remarked: "It is war."

No one had practised more faithfully the golden rule "*gouverner, c'est prévoir.*" He knew the difficulties of giving the benefit of his foresight to misinformed and deluded people, but he also realized the futility of indulging in recriminations at such a critical moment, and the necessity of confronting the future with a cool head and a steady hand.

(4) What happened exactly at that fateful Council which lasted from 9 p.m. on August the 2nd to 4 a.m. on August the 3rd? Our information is still incomplete, and the statements made by some of the witnesses do not always agree. The proceedings were delayed owing to the fact that several ministers could not reach the Palace at the appointed time. The Ministers of State<sup>1</sup> arrived at 10 p.m. The impression made on the meeting by the German Note seems, according to all reports, to have been similar to that made on the officials of the Foreign Office a few hours previously. Opening the discussion, the King gave his answer: "No, whatever the consequences."<sup>2</sup> He was, however, particularly anxious that the members of the Council should support him with a full knowledge of these consequences. He was under no illusion concerning the thorough preparations made in Germany, the inadequacy of the Belgian forces, and the danger of delay with regard to French and British military help. He did all in his power to sober the patriotic indignation which swept over the meeting as soon as the terms of the German proposals were disclosed, by emphasizing the gravity of the situation and impressing upon the assembled Statesmen the terrible and ruthless character of modern warfare.

<sup>1</sup> A small group of Statesmen who fill the part of Privy Councillors and do not belong to the Cabinet.

<sup>2</sup> Comte Carton de Wiart: *Albert Ier*

After a short discussion, a committee including MM. de Broqueville, Davignon, Carton de Wiart, Minister of Justice, van den Heuvel and Hymans, Ministers of State, was entrusted with the drafting of the Belgian answer. These gentlemen reached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shortly after midnight, where they found Baron de Gaiffier hard at work on the text of the reply. Without any knowledge of the Council's decision, the *Directeur de la Politique* had foreseen that a negative answer would be given. A second draft was prepared forthwith by the committee which did not substantially differ from the first.<sup>1</sup>

While this work was going on, at 1.30 a.m., Baron van der Elst, who was in attendance, was told that the German Minister wished to see him. Herr von Below, who was evidently anxious to gather some impression regarding the Belgian attitude, informed the Secretary-General that French dirigibles had dropped bombs and that some French patrols had crossed the frontier.

"Where did these events take place?" asked Baron van der Elst.

—In Germany.

—Under these circumstances, I fail to understand the meaning of your communication."

The German Minister replied that, since these acts constituted a breach of international law, no declaration of war having yet been delivered, they might foretell French intentions with regard to Belgian neutrality. The news was not only false but had no bearing on the discussion.

The draft of the Belgian reply had meanwhile been brought back to the Royal Palace, where the meeting was resumed. Its text was unanimously approved.<sup>2</sup> After summarizing the main points of the German ultimatum the

<sup>1</sup> See Pl. 1 and 2, and Appendix I. A comparison between the two texts, hitherto unpublished, shows that King, Ministers and Diplomats were at one in the decision taken by Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> As chairman, the King insisted that every member of the Council should individually record his vote.



1 Conclusion of the first draft of the Belgian answer to the  
German ultimatum

*By kind permission of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign  
Affairs. See Appendix I.)*

Belgian Government explained their attitude in the following terms:

*This note has made a deep and painful impression upon the Belgian Government.*

*The intentions attributed to France by Germany are in contradiction to the formal declarations made to us on August 1st, in the name of the French Government.*

*Moreover if, contrary to our expectation, Belgian neutrality should be violated by France, Belgium intends to fulfil her international obligations and the Belgian Army would offer the most vigorous resistance to the invader.*

*The Treaties of 1839, confirmed by the Treaties of 1870 vouch for the independence and neutrality of Belgium under the guarantee of the Powers, and notably of the Government of His Majesty the King of Prussia.*

*Belgium has always been faithful to her international obligations, she has carried out her duties in a spirit of loyal impartiality, and she has left nothing undone to maintain and enforce respect for her neutrality.*

*The attack upon her independence with which the German Government threatens her constitutes a flagrant violation of international law. No strategic interest justifies such a violation of law.*

*The Belgian Government, if they were to accept the proposals submitted to them, would sacrifice the honour of the nation and betray their duty towards Europe.*

*Conscious of the part which Belgium has played for more than eighty years in the civilization of the world, they refuse to believe that the independence of Belgium can only be preserved at the price of the violation of her neutrality.*

*If this hope is disappointed the Belgian Government*

*are firmly resolved to repel, by all the means in their power, every attack upon their rights.*

The pretext invoked in the ultimatum thus received decisive contradiction. The duties imposed upon the country by her international status, and by the treaties to which Germany herself was a party, were briefly summed up; and the supremacy of law over brute force was firmly asserted. Everybody felt that, however disastrous the consequences of the decision might be for the country, any effort to postpone the issue or to ask Germany to reconsider her decision would be both useless and undignified. It was decided that the answer should be delivered at the eleventh hour, and that the British and French Governments should be informed at the same time. But, following the King's advice, it was also agreed that nothing should be done which might be interpreted as a breach of neutrality until Germany had been given an opportunity of replying. There was still a faint possibility that the ultimatum might be a cunning device to ascertain Belgium's intentions, and that, confronted with a decisive "No," the German Government might hesitate to face the consequences of their rash action. Belgian military resistance was no doubt considered of small account, but Great Britain stood behind Belgium and the course of diplomatic events should have made it plain by then to Germany that a violation of Belgian neutrality was incompatible with the preservation of British friendship. Besides, King Albert had not yet received an answer to his letter to the Kaiser, and some result might still be expected from this personal appeal.

The Catholic veteran, M. Woeste, having raised the question of military preparations, the King called upon the Chief of Staff, Général de Selliers de Moranville, who had been hastily summoned to the Palace, for further information. He was followed by Général de Ryckel, sub-Chief of Staff, who spoke of the necessity of defending the country on the Meuse, close to the eastern frontier. His



2 Conclusion of the second draft of the Belgian answer to the  
German ultimatum

(*By kind permission of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign  
Affairs - See Appendix I*)

views were shared by the King who, for many months had studied the question with his military adviser, Captain Galet, and had formed his own conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the actual authorship of the Belgian Note which has been so much discussed is of secondary importance. What matters is that it was written under King Albert's inspiration, and that this young leader of thirty-nine years of age was able to instil his courage and unshaken confidence into the mind and actions of his collaborators.

No single man can prompt seven million people to walk cheerfully into a scorching fire of horror and misery in order to save their honour. The King's answer was the nation's answer. The German ultimatum would have been rejected under any circumstances. There was no other solution. Any statesman, in a democratic liberty-loving country, faced with the alternative of betraying national independence and waging war must choose the latter course. But it was thanks to King Albert's prestige that the decision did not appear to his people merely as a choice between two evils, and that they embraced their fate with such a burning enthusiasm that, after twenty years, its glow can still be felt in every Belgian heart. It was largely owing to his foresight and energy, during the four first years of his reign, that the Belgians could contemplate the forthcoming struggle with some hope of putting up a fight and making an effort worthy of their cause. It was almost entirely due to his military leadership and to the enthusiasm which it stirred in the Army that this fight was prolonged to the end and that Belgium, instead of becoming merely an object of pity, preserved through all her reverses, the dignity of an unconquerable nation.

As the ministers were preparing to leave the Palace, the first rays of dawn were lighting up the horizon. The King turned towards the window and, without a word,

<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant-Général Galet: *Albert, King of the Belgians, in the Great War*, p. 47.

Général de Selliers in *Le Flambeau*, August 21st, 1921.

pointed out to his ministers the brilliant clouds spreading over the town, and the Statesmen dispersed if not confident of victory, at least determined to work as if it were at hand.

(5) The Belgian answer was delivered by M. de Gaiffier to the German Minister at seven o'clock on August 3rd. The French and British Legations were immediately advised, and soon afterwards the stupendous news appeared in the Belgian papers.

Nothing shows better the misunderstanding caused by the impartial attitude of Belgium in pre-War years than the surprise expressed by the French Minister when he learnt that the Government had rejected the German offer. For months past, M. Klobukowski had been sending gloomy reports to Paris concerning Belgium's doubtful attitude. He and his military attaché were full of apprehensions concerning the intentions of the Catholic Government. Every utterance in the Press or in Parliament which did not appear blatantly pro-French or which merely reflected a detached attitude towards the forthcoming conflict between the Entente Powers and the Triple Alliance, was denounced as pro-German. The Government was described as sitting on the fence, ready to go over to the winning side, and their intention to defend Belgian neutrality was seriously questioned. As soon as he heard of the German ultimatum, the French Minister jumped to the conclusion that Belgium would not resist. Scarcely had M. Davignon's messenger greeted him when the Minister exclaimed: "Well, you are giving way?"<sup>1</sup>

When M. Klobukowski realized his mistake he experienced a complete revulsion of feelings, and spontaneously declared to M. Davignon that if Belgium appealed to France for help, her request would be immediately answered. He added that he had not been instructed to deliver this message but could personally vouch for his Government's intentions. The Belgian Minister replied, according to the instructions

<sup>1</sup> De Ridder in *La Belgique et la Guerre*, IV, 137

he had received on the previous night, that Belgium had not yet decided to appeal to the guaranteeing Powers for military help. This interview is worth recording because a strange legend arose about that time which deserves to figure in the folk-lore of the War, together with the Russian reinforcements rushed through Scotland, and other creations of an over-excited imagination.<sup>1</sup>

M. Klobukowski was supposed to have suggested, on August 3rd, the immediate dispatch of five French army corps to Belgium, and the Belgian Government was later on criticized for having refused this generous offer, thus gravely compromising the defence of the country. It is scarcely necessary to point out that the French Command was not at the time in a position to make such a proposal. In spite of the fact that help was demanded from France the very next day, after the violation of the Belgian frontier by the German Army, the first French corps only appeared south of Namur a fortnight later.

This legend seems to have had a curious influence on the discussions which took place, during the first days of August, among the members of the British Cabinet. The rumour had spread that Belgium, if attacked, would not defend her neutrality or that, at any rate, her resistance would be limited to a military demonstration. The supposed refusal of French help confirmed certain British Ministers in their opinion and prompted them to suggest that Great Britain, by her interference, might inflict the horrors of a desperate war on an unwilling people.<sup>2</sup> This error, however, was soon to be dispelled.

At the ministerial Council, which took place in Brussels at 10 a.m., it was decided that the information sent to the Powers who had guaranteed Belgian neutrality should be followed by a request for immediate diplomatic, as distinct from military, support. A slight hope remained that the

<sup>1</sup> Général de Selliers : *La première légende de la Guerre mondiale* (*Le Flambeau*, September 1921).

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Spender and C. Asquith : *Life of Lord Oxford*.

German threat would not be followed by military action and, as already explained, the King was particularly anxious, during these critical hours, not to provide Germany with the slightest pretext for justifying her aggression. It must not be forgotten that, at this time, that country was not yet at war either with France or with Great Britain.

During the following night, however, King Albert received the long-expected answer to his letter to the German Emperor. It was a short telegram, confirming the ultimatum:

My most sincere thanks for Your Majesty's letter and the sentiments expressed in it. If I have felt myself compelled to make so grave a demand on Your Majesty's Government, it was with the most friendly intentions towards Belgium, and only under the compulsion of this critical moment, when the fate of Germany is at stake. As the conditions specified make clear, the possibility of maintaining our former and present relations still lies in the hands of Your Majesty. My feelings towards Your Majesty and your country remain unchanged.

WILLIAM.

For the first time the King was unable to control his anger. Showing this communication to his secretary, he exclaimed: "What does he take me for?" and immediately issued orders for the blowing up of all bridges and tunnels on the Luxembourg railway.<sup>1</sup> His answer, however, showed scarcely any trace of emotion and merely emphasized the argument contained in the Belgian Note of the previous day, laying special stress on respect for international treaties and their obligations:

The friendly feelings which I have expressed to Your Majesty and those which Your Majesty had on many occasions lavished on me, the cordial relations of our two Governments, the correct attitude which Belgium has

<sup>1</sup> L. de Peauw: *Albert, Troisième Roi des Belges*, p. 58.

always observed and against which Germany has never been able to formulate the slightest reproach, did not allow me for one moment to suppose that Your Majesty would place us before the cruel alternative of choosing, in the face of the whole of Europe, between war and the loss of honour, between the respect of treaties and the denial of our international obligations.

The King's conception of honour was not based on the aristocratic idea of pride or prestige, but on the fundamental principle of honesty, in private and in public matters, which is at the basis of all decent civilization. A few months later, a striking cartoon appeared in *Punch* in which the Kaiser was shown, confronting the Belgian King among the ruins of his devastated country. The insult and the reply are still familiar: "You see, you have lost everything!"—"Not my soul." This cartoon expressed adequately the admiration of the British public for the Belgian national hero, and for the splendid fight he was making against tremendous odds. But the somewhat theatrical gesture and the dramatic words, do not faithfully express the spirit in which the King took his decision and acted upon it. He was first and foremost conscious of his responsibilities towards his people and towards Europe. Nothing was further from his thoughts than to allow his personal sympathies, or his own conception of the rights and the wrongs of the impending European struggle to influence his policy. Belgium was a permanently neutral country like Switzerland, and would have jealously preserved this neutrality, if she had been allowed to do so. Popular monarchs have been called in the past "the fathers of their people," and the first duty of a father is to shelter his children against moral and material danger. The somewhat selfish provision of the Belgian Constitution, which thrust upon the Sovereign the leadership of the army and the preservation of the country's independence, was interpreted by King Albert as literally as the duties of neutrality,

imposed on Belgium by the Treaties of 1839. He was responsible to his people, they were responsible to the world. If by any honourable means the catastrophe could have been avoided, he would have been the first to use them. But since such means did not exist, war was to be pursued to the end, with a maximum of results and a minimum of losses.

All those who approached King Albert during this first period of the struggle were struck by the calm decision with which he accepted the unavoidable. He did not waste any energy in denouncing the enemy, still less did he think of revenge. He was like a captain in a tempest whose thoughts are only for his ship and his crew. Duty and honour were identical.

Several years later, in Paris, he answered a French Statesman who had praised him as a great hero, with the following words: "*Oui, nous avons été acculés à l'héroïsme.*" "We were driven to heroism." Or, more literally: "We were cornered into heroism."

(6) From August the 4th, the centre of diplomatic interest shifted from Brussels to London. The British Note addressed on July 31st by Sir Edward Grey to Germany had not yet received a definite answer. The only assurance given concerned Belgian territorial integrity, but no reference was made either to independence or neutrality. The Cabinet was divided with regard to the attitude to be taken in case of war between the Central Powers and France and Russia, but the British ministers were in agreement concerning the Belgian question as soon as the ultimatum and the Belgian reply were made known in London.

The only hope of avoiding a conflict was that Germany's threat would not be followed by immediate action. Early on August the 3rd King Albert had sent a telegram to King George requesting British diplomatic support:

"Remembering," he wrote, "the numerous proofs of Your Majesty's friendship and that of your predecessor, the friendly attitude of England in 1870, and the proof of

friendship you have just given us again, I make a supreme appeal to the diplomatic intervention of Your Majesty's Government to safeguard the integrity of Belgium." It is reported that after reading this message, King George remarked: "We must help." The reception of Sir Edward Grey's speech in the Commons showed that this conviction was shared by the people's representatives. The same night, after a meeting of the Cabinet, the Foreign Secretary was able to assure Comte de Lalaing, Belgian Minister in London, that the violation of Belgian territory meant war for Great Britain.

On August the 4th, in the morning, Sir Edward Grey had sent an urgent wire to Sir E. Goschen, British Ambassador in Berlin, instructing him to obtain definite assurance from the German Government that the ultimatum would not be followed by the military invasion of Belgium. At six o'clock, Herr von Below communicated to M. Davignon a letter stating that Germany's "well-intentioned" proposals having been declined, she was obliged to proceed "if need be by force" with the measures she deemed necessary for her defence. This letter was immediately transmitted to London through Sir Francis Villiers. It was not a formal declaration of war, for the German military authorities were particularly anxious to leave the door open to further negotiations. As General von Moltke expressed it in a message to Herr von Jagow on the previous evening: "It is still to be hoped that we shall come to an understanding with Belgium, when her Government realizes the gravity of the situation."

A few hours later, German troops crossed the frontier at several points, and all reason for postponing her demand for military help being removed, Belgium addressed the following communication to the Ministers of Great Britain, France, and Russia:

Sir,

BRUSSELS, August 4th, 1914.

*The Belgian Government regret to have to announce to your Excellency that this morning the armed forces of*

*Germany entered Belgian territory in violation of treaty engagements.*

*The Belgian Government are firmly determined to resist by all the means in their power.*

*Belgium appeals to Great Britain, France, and Russia to co-operate as guaranteeing Powers in the defence of her territory.*

*There should be concerted and joint action to oppose the forcible measures taken by Germany against Belgium, and at the same time to guarantee the future maintenance of the independence and integrity of Belgium.*

*Belgium is happy to be able to declare that she will undertake the defence of her fortified places.*

The last sentence was added to comply with King Albert's wish. Following the advice given him by his uncle, he realized the necessity for Belgium to take an important share in the military operations, and to show herself not entirely dependent on her guarantors' help.

Meanwhile, German diplomacy still endeavoured to obtain British abstention by raising the price which she was prepared to pay for it. She had already promised the maintenance of Belgium's integrity. On August the 4th, in the morning, Prince Lichnowski, German Ambassador in London, assured Sir Edward Grey that the invasion of Belgium was for Germany a question of "life and death," but that she undertook not to annex the country at the end of the hostilities, even if resistance were offered. Later in the day the German Chancellor went still further, pledging Germany to preserve Belgian political independence. This policy of bargains broke against Sir Edward Grey's determination to compel the German military authorities to alter their plans. On hearing of the violation of the Belgian frontier, he sent his ultimatum and a dramatic interview took place, at 7 p.m., between Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg and Sir E. Goschen in which the former, in endeavouring to minimize the cause of the conflict, used

the famous expression "scrap of paper." In his War Memoirs, the German Chancellor explained why he lost his temper: "My blood boiled at his hypocritical harping on Belgian neutrality, which was not the thing which had driven England into war." He would not admit that so momentous a decision could be taken for a trivial reason and, when the British Ambassador assured him that no consequences could be considered when such a vital principle was concerned, he could no longer control his indignation.<sup>1</sup>

The same complete misunderstanding prevailed during the last visit of Baron Beyens, Belgian Minister in Berlin, to Herr von Jagow, which had taken place a few hours before. To the Baron's demand for explanations with regard to the ultimatum, the German Minister opposed the same argument of *force majeure*. He frankly explained that "Germany must be finished with France as quickly as possible to be able to turn against Russia, otherwise she would be caught between the hammer and the anvil," and that the Franco-German frontier was too strongly fortified to permit a rapid victory in that quarter. He fully recognized that "Germany had nothing to reproach Belgium with . . . her attitude had always been correct." He further said: "If the Belgian Army allows us to pass freely without destroying the railways, without blowing up the bridges and tunnels, and if it retires on Antwerp without attempting to defend Liège, we undertake not only to respect the independence of Belgium, the lives and property of the inhabitants, but also to indemnify you for any loss incurred."

"The Belgian Government," answered Baron Beyens, "conscious of their duties towards all the guarantors of the country's neutrality can make no reply to such a proposal, other than the one they have made without hesitation. . . . You must recognize yourself that no other was possible." Herr von Jagow finally declared: "I recognize it. . . . I

<sup>1</sup> Von Bethmann-Hollweg: *Reflections on the World War.*

recognize it as a private individual, but as Secretary of State I have no opinion to express."

On the Belgian Minister intimating his readiness to leave Berlin, Herr von Jagow pressed him not to break off relations in this way as there might "still be something to talk over." It was advisable that the door should remain open.<sup>1</sup>

When people accuse each other of insincerity, it is often because they have ceased to talk the same language, and because their sense of values is at variance. To the German statesmen of 1914, there evidently existed a cleavage between individual and national morality, and the same standards could not be applied to civil and to international law. When the future of the German Reich was concerned, the interest involved appeared so tremendous that no undertaking, either public or private, could be allowed to interfere. All questions of principle became questions of expediency. Provided their observance did not hinder the imperial policy of aggrandizement and hegemony, treaties and international conventions bearing Germany's signature were, of course, to be observed, but the moment they impeded action in a time of crisis, they might and must be ignored.

This book is not concerned with the question of War responsibility, and it is not its purpose to summarize the history of the fifty years preceding the conflict and to search for arguments in favour of one group of Powers against another, but it is impossible to place the attitude of King Albert in its true light, during those first days of August 1914, without insisting on the profound contrast between the motives which inspired his policy and those which determined that of Germany's responsible leaders. The surprise and disappointment of the latter is not to be wondered at. They naturally assumed that the excuse of supreme necessity which they so readily invoked for breaking their engagements, would be also adopted by the Belgian Government to justify their subservience. If the

<sup>1</sup> Second *Grey Book*, No. 25.

strongest Military Power in Europe could cry: "*Not kennt kein Gebot*," one of the weakest would obviously shout "*Force majeure*" or "*Raison d'État*," and it must have been galling to hear instead the calm answer, "*Noblesse oblige*." For the first time in the course of modern history, the world was confronted with doctrines diametrically opposed to each other. A struggle which might have been the outcome of the rivalry of two Powers or of two groups of Powers, was suddenly raised to a higher level in which material were subordinated to spiritual interests. This was, no doubt, what Paul Bourget had in mind when, alluding to King Albert, he wrote: "But for him, this bitter War would only have been a world catastrophe without any definite meaning."

(7) Three momentous meetings took place on August the 4th in London, Berlin, and Brussels.

In London, Mr. Asquith endorsed the policy pursued during the preceding days and confirmed Sir Edward Grey's belief that no material consideration could be of any value compared with the prestige Great Britain would lose were she to "abandon her honourable undertakings concerning the Belgian Treaty." He reminded the House of Commons of the German ultimatum, of the Belgian reply, and of the appeal made by King Albert to King George. He gave a full account of Prince Lichnowski's promises concerning the maintenance of Belgian territorial integrity. The Prime Minister added that H.M.'s Government could in no way regard this as a satisfactory communication: "We have in the reply repeated the request that we made to the German Government last week, that it would give us the same assurance as to Belgian neutrality as that given by France to Belgium and to us, a week ago. We have asked that a reply to this request . . . shall be given before midnight."

In Berlin, the Imperial Chancellor spoke at great length in the Reichstag. Very bluntly, he admitted that the

violation of Belgian neutrality was contrary to international law, and promised that reparations should be made to the victim of Germany's action:

"Gentlemen, we are now in a state of necessity (*Notwehr*), and necessity knows no law. Our troops have occupied Luxemburg and perhaps have already entered Belgian territory.

"Gentlemen, that is a breach of international law. It is true that the French Government declared at Brussels that France would respect Belgian neutrality as long as her adversary respected it. We knew, however, that France was ready for an invasion. France could wait, we could not. A French attack on our flank on the lower Rhine might have been disastrous. Thus we were forced to ignore the rightful protests of the Governments of Luxemburg and Belgium. The wrong—I speak openly—the wrong we thereby commit we will try to make good as soon as our military aims have been attained."

The German Chancellor was bitterly reproached at a later date for his unambiguous admission. Did he speak so plainly in the faint hope of avoiding at the eleventh hour a breach with Great Britain, or merely to satisfy his own conscience? In spite of the fact that his attitude altered during the long controversy which followed, it must be stated that he confirmed in 1919 his opinion of August 1914. The "injustice" towards Belgium still appeared to him evident and he deplored its consequences; the Chief of Staff, however, having declared at the time that "there was an absolute military necessity," he felt compelled to act accordingly.

In Brussels, an emergency meeting of both Chambers had been called for ten o'clock in the morning. At that time the news of the violation of the Belgian frontier had not yet reached the Government. The town had already taken on that festive appearance which it preserved up to

the moment when the Germans entered it. The national colours waved from every house and the people, who in the early hours crowded the streets, succeeded in hiding their anxiety under an apparent cheerfulness. The King left the Palace riding his charger and wearing service uniform. The Queen followed in an open carriage with her three children. The small procession passed through the serried ranks, and the hoarse cheering of the crowd; a very different cheering from that which had greeted Albert I, five years before, when he ascended the throne. It had a curious ring of almost painful enthusiasm.

"I shall always remember him," writes an eyewitness, "as he rode forward slowly and steadily among the acclamations and the flags. I thought of the occasion of his accession to the throne which seemed still so recent, when he had passed through Brussels in an atmosphere of universal illusion, and of the salute he gave in answer to these joyful demonstrations, his grave smile scarcely perceptible behind his gold-rimmed glasses. To-day it was the vivid and unadorned reality, a reality which took you by the throat. To all appearances, Albert I had remained the same. His composure restored confidence. Without hurry and without hesitation, this young and just man went straight where duty called him."<sup>1</sup>

When he reached the "Palais de la Nation" the King dismounted and among deafening cries of "*Vive le Roi,*" "*Vive la Belgique indépendante,*" ascended the steps where deputies and senators had gathered to welcome him. There was not one dissentient voice among them all. Their emotion swept away all differences like chaff before the wind. At one moment the Sovereign seemed overcome by the sheer weight of enthusiasm, but he soon recovered himself and with quickened steps reached the crowded Chamber, followed by the Royal Family. A sudden silence succeeded the tumult of the street.

"Never since 1830," the King was heard to say, "has

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Notchomb: *I e Roi Albert*

there been so grave an hour for Belgium. The integrity of our land is threatened.

"The very strength of our cause, the sympathy which Belgium, proud of her free institutions and moral achievements, has always received from other nations, and the necessity of our independent existence for the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe, give us hope that the events which are threatening us will not materialize.

"But if our hope be vain, we must resist the invasion of our land and defend our threatened homes; we must, whatever the difficulty, be found armed and ready for the greatest sacrifices. . . .

"Already, our valiant young men have risen, firmly resolved to defend our country in danger. . . . In the name of the Nation, I greet them as brethren. Everywhere, in Flanders and in Wallonia, in town and country, one thought alone fills our hearts—patriotism; one single vision fills our minds, our threatened independence; one duty alone steels our energy, obstinate resistance.

"In these grave circumstances, two virtues are indispensable, cool and steady courage and union among all Belgians. Both have already appeared.

"The perfectly conducted mobilization of our army, the large number of voluntary enlistments, the devotion of the civilian population and the self-denial of families, have shown unmistakably the valour which inspires the Belgian people.

"The time for action has come.

"I have called you together, gentlemen, so that the Legislative Chambers may be able to associate themselves with the feeling of the people in the same spirit of sacrifice.

"You will know how to take at once, gentlemen, all the measures, both for war and for public order which the situation requires.

"When I see this assembly, in which there is now but one party, the party of our country, where all hearts beat as one, my thoughts go back to the Congress of 1830, and

I ask—Are you inflexibly resolved to maintain intact the sacred heritage of our fathers? (*Yes, yes!* from all sides.)

“No one in this country will fail in his duty.

“The army, strong and disciplined, has risen to its task. My Government and I have full confidence in its leaders and in the soldiers.

“Firmly linked with the people and sustained by them, the Government realizes its responsibilities and will shoulder them until the end in the confident belief that the efforts of all . . . will safeguard the supreme well-being of the country.

“If the foreigner, disregarding our neutrality, and the duties which we have always scrupulously fulfilled, violates our territory, he will find all Belgians ranged behind their Sovereign, who will never betray his constitutional oath, and their Government, in which the whole nation has absolute confidence.

“I have faith in our destiny. A country which defends itself is respected by all. That country will not perish.

“God be with us and our just cause.

“Long live independent Belgium!”

The King delivered this address slowly and distinctly, without the slightest touch of parliamentary eloquence. Only occasionally did he lower the paper from which he was reading to look at his audience. His deep voice never rose to the high pitch of public oratory. He remained throughout immovable, and to all appearances impassive. But those who were accustomed to hear him noticed a change in his tone, in his manner. The cloak of shyness seemed to have dropped from his shoulders. There was a new ring of command in his voice. Never did such a simple speech produce such a strong impression. All present had been ready to follow him, but some doubts lingered in the minds of a few deputies concerning the quality of his leadership. He was young, untried, he lacked military experience. His words reassured the most sceptical. Before this day,

Albert I had been loved, henceforth he would be trusted. Without effort, merely by submitting to the course of events and remaining as he was, acting and speaking as he felt compelled to act and to speak, he had established his authority on unshakable foundations, and stirred a devotion which remained unimpaired through the ordeal of war and the disillusionments of peace.

The occasion was, no doubt, extraordinary, but the speech itself was still more remarkable. That no mention was made of the ultimatum might be explained by the justifiable anxiety not to offend German susceptibilities at a time when it was still hoped that the threat of invasion would not be fulfilled, but why lose this unique opportunity of justifying before Parliament the attitude of the Government and the terms of the Belgian reply? The whole nation was going to be launched into the most dangerous struggle for the sake of neutrality, and the responsibilities of neutrality were not even dwelt upon. Belgium was being sacrificed on the altar of international law, and the duties which this law imposed upon her were not even explained or emphasized. Instinctively the King realized the state of public opinion at the time. Legal and diplomatic arguments would have been out of place. It was useless to waste time in attempting to convert the converted and answering objections which were not raised. What the country felt was the threat of immediate invasion and the urgent need of defending hearth and home; what she needed was energetic leadership, good advice and confidence in the future. This was exactly what the King's words gave her. The time for action had arrived, the army had risen to its task, the volunteers were rushing to arms. Given a cool and steady courage, united patriotism, and a deep sense of duty, the people would finally succeed in preserving their independence.

At that supreme moment when the nation was so sorely in need of encouragement, and when some of the cleverest European Statesmen, carried away by their

feelings, nursed and fostered the wildest illusions, King Albert refrained from indulging in vague promises. His words, when he spoke of the future, were carefully chosen, he appealed to the people's spirit of sacrifice, and declared his confident belief that the country would ultimately be saved, but his tone remained grave and he kept close to the realities of the situation as he saw them.

The text of the speech was preserved in many Belgian homes and was read later again and again. Three words, which had almost passed unnoticed, assumed ever greater importance as month followed month and year followed year: "Until the end."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Rising Popularity

KING ALBERT was one of the few great men whose character developed on the same broad pattern from the beginning to the end of his life. This is all the more remarkable inasmuch as he was subjected to vicissitudes of fortune which might have shaken the resolution of the staunchest stoic. Age and experience accentuated certain features of his personality. His intelligence broadened, and his understanding and sympathy deepened with the passing of years; his will-power strengthened through adversity; but, on the whole, he remained at the end of his career much the same man—one would be tempted to say the same boy—that he was at the beginning. We do not notice in his life any of those abrupt conversions or changes of attitude which allow the biographer to divide his story into a series of distinct periods. The stream is navigable almost from its source to its mouth; no precipitous rapids or stagnant pools interrupt its steady course, and even the catastrophe of war and exile does not alter its main direction. Physically and morally, the man of fifty looked very like the boy of twenty, and there is a close correspondence between the youthful smile which lightened the lined face of the one and the premature gravity which overspread the features of the other. Had it been possible to scrutinize the mind of the young Prince, all the moral motives and intellectual conceptions which determined the actions of the mature King might have been discovered. The inner soul remains calm throughout; it is the outer world which provides the tragedy.

(A) *Education*

(1) It is not generally known that the happy marriage between King Albert's father and mother was the result of Queen Victoria's fondness for match-making. After the death of her "dear Uncle" Leopold I, she concerned herself with the happiness of his second son, "the good Philip," and wished to join his destiny with that of a virtuous German Princess who had won her heart. Princess Marie belonged to the Catholic branch of the House of Hohenzollern, as opposed to the Protestant reigning branch. She was a Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, and was also connected with France through her grandfathers, one of whom had married Antoinette Murat and the other Stéphanie de Beauharnais.

The Princess had received an excellent education, and her tastes coincided with those of the Count of Flanders, who greatly preferred his home to the Court, and was soon isolated from social life through deafness. He was without ambition and had inherited from his mother, Marie-Louise, the simple tastes of the Orleans family. The Count and Countess settled in their Palace, in the rue de la Régence, and devoted themselves to the education of their children. They entertained rarely, and led the life of ordinary well-to-do people, the Count spending much time in his large library—he was a keen collector of books—and the Countess taking particular interest in the artistic life of Brussels.

(2) The belief in the saving virtue of education, in Victorian days, was not limited to England. It pervaded the whole Continent and was particularly strong among serious-minded aristocrats and bourgeois who, willynilly, fell under the spell of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his followers. *Emile* was in all libraries, and the idea prevailed that the problem of human happiness might be solved, if a careful education were given to those called by birth or wealth to lead their compatriots on the way to progress.

Such theories had haunted the minds of Leopold I and his adviser Stockmar. The *Memoirs* of the latter contain

many judicial references to the subject, which reveal an almost childlike belief in educational methods. Writing to his patron, in 1836, concerning their plan of preparing Prince Albert, the King's nephew, for his career as Prince Consort, Stockmar declares that the first step to be taken is to explain to the Prince the difficulties of the project. "If this does not terrify him," he adds, "then, in my opinion, two things are requisite. The first is a well-planned system of education for his future career, with special reference to the peculiar land and people over which he would be called upon to reign; and the second is that he should win the affection of the Princess before he asks her in marriage."

Eight years later, the doctor-diplomat prepared an extensive memorandum for Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, advising them on the soundest principles according to which their children ought to be brought up. He begins with an historical survey of the Royal Family in which every fault is described as a deliberate negligence on the part of the tutors in charge: "Down to the present day," he writes, "England honours the memory of George III, because he cultivated the domestic virtues. History is already taking the liberty of questioning his services as a Sovereign, but praises without exception his private life. But George III either did not properly understand his duties as a father, or he neglected them. Three of his sons, George IV, the Duke of York and William IV were all brought up in England. Their faults already belong to history. Unfortunately, they were of the most marked kind, and we can only explain them by supposing either that the persons charged with their education were incapable of inculcating principles of truth and morality in their youth, or that they culpably neglected to do so, or, lastly, that they were not properly supported in the fulfilment of their duty by the Royal parents."

Although some pupils, such as Queen Victoria's eldest son, did not gladly respond to the stern control imposed upon them, there is no doubt that, tempered with indulgence, the system worked extremely well in the case

of the young Belgian Princes. "It is not enough to possess illustrious ancestors, you must prove worthy of them," was one of the Countess's favourite sayings. She brought up her children in an atmosphere of almost austere simplicity. Their rooms were deprived of all superfluous ornaments. Towards the end of his life, talking to the director of a Belgian school, King Albert urged him not to pamper his boys, adding that during all his youth he never had sugar in his coffee. The day was divided according to a time-table and, as soon as the children were able to learn, a staff of teachers was attached to the house. Work was continued during the holidays, spent either in a villa on the Lake of Lucerne or, more frequently, in the Château des Amerois, among the wild hills of the Ardennes.

The Prince's parents insisted on regular studies and a strict observance of the time-table. They developed, from the first, their children's sense of duty, put them on their honour to fulfil their tasks and, above all, exacted absolute sincerity.

There is a characteristic anecdote showing little Albert, the youngest of the family, working at his desk and teased by his two elder sisters who wished him to come and play with them. "Do you like working?" they asked him. "No," he replied, "I don't like it, but I must."

Although somewhat austere, this education was neither harsh nor dogmatic. The Countess was particularly warm-hearted and broad-minded. She was a Catholic, but her mother, for whom she had the greatest admiration, had been a Protestant, and it is no doubt to her early influence that we should trace that complete lack of prejudice which, in later years, allowed King Albert to associate freely with compatriots and foreigners who did not share his beliefs, or who belonged to a different Church. With him freedom of conscience was not merely a convenient formula, but a living reality, and he soon realized that honour and sincerity were not determined either by politics or by religion.

A German governess who was with the family from 1877 to 1882 published some of her recollections after the tragedy of 1934: "My thoughts linger sadly," she wrote, "on the young boy who passed a happy youth in Brussels in his father's Palace. The family usually spent the summer at the Amerois, and the little Prince's greatest joy was to romp in the meadows and among the bushes. He sometimes built small waterfalls by piling up stones across the brooks. He was absorbed in his games. Among my memories I see his crude drawings: trees and flowers, but mostly engines and railways. I still hear him, standing on a train made of chairs, his hair waving in the wind, shouting '*Départ pour Charleroi!*' blowing his whistle and urging little Princess Joséphine to take her seat.

"A great refinement of feeling, simplicity, kindness and a strong sense of justice, which distinguished his parents, were already noticeable in the child. All those who knew him remarked on his frankness; nothing would have induced him to tell a lie—a good omen for the future."

This picture of the "good little boy" would prove far less valuable if it were not duly enlivened with incidents showing that adventure was already at war with duty, and frequently gained the upper hand.

Pipes, lying along the street, seem to have had a peculiar fascination for the child. One eyewitness records an exploit which occurred when Prince Albert was only five years old, and was walking with his father in a street where gas was being laid on. While the Count was engaged in conversation his son slipped away and, joining a band of urchins playing among the pipes, covered himself with tar. A few years later, another observer saw the two Princes walking with an officer along the Avenue Louise where, this time, large water-pipes were encumbering the road. While Baudouin kept pace with his tutor, young Albert hung back and, a few moments later, disappeared. The officer was not a little alarmed, when, searching in all directions, he could not discover his charge. The latter, however, put an end



5. The Countess of Flanders and her children - Princess Henriette  
Prince Albert - Princess Josephine and Prince Baudouin  
*Photo Musée de l'Imme*

to his anxiety by emerging from his hiding-place, chuckling with glee.

There was evidently a good deal of mischief in him, especially when let loose in the countryside near the Amerois. On one occasion, while roaming along the Semois, he fell into the river. When his tutor reminded him, somewhat pompously, of what he owed to his position, he retorted impertinently: "Never mind, Monsieur, don't worry. You will get your decoration all the same." This prank was followed by a punishment of three days' confinement to his room.

Studies were pursued relentlessly. Besides religious instruction there was a teacher of Latin, political economy and the elements of law, another for French literature and philosophy, others still for Flemish, English, German, mathematics, physics and natural sciences. Comparing his tasks with those of other boys of his age, Albert was beginning to realize that the career of a prince, according to the Stockmar philosophy, was by no means a bed of roses. He went on working steadily, but without enthusiasm. His spare time was usually devoted to mechanics. "Meccano" did not exist, unfortunately, in those days, but he loved to take toys to pieces to see how they were made. Unlike most other boys, he never failed to put them together again.

He was rather lonely and retiring. He had the deepest admiration for his brother Baudouin whom he tried to imitate in many ways, but the latter was six years older and, as heir to the throne, had a still heavier programme to fulfil.

As a boy, Albert found more intimate companionship with his sisters, Henriette, who became Duchess of Vendôme, and especially Joséphine, who was only three years older, and who soon became his close confidante. This was the origin of a lifelong friendship and of a long correspondence, interrupted by the War—Princess Joséphine married Prince Charles of Hohenzollern—but resumed in later years.

(3) In 1888, the Count of Flanders met by chance a young officer, Captain Jungbluth, to whom he took a fancy, and he decided to make him *Gouverneur* to his second son. The choice was criticized at the time on the grounds that the Captain's philosophy was anything but orthodox. He was a *libre penseur*, that is to say an opponent of Church influence in social life, and, being particularly outspoken, was not looked upon with favour in Court circles. Was the Prince going to be subjected to the sway of this young "liberal" officer?

Captain Jungbluth was a man of honour, and could be relied upon to respect his pupil's religious convictions, which were already deep-rooted. He soon discovered that the young Prince, who was often compared unfavourably with his elder brother, possessed a strong character. He was, no doubt, less brilliant than Prince Baudouin, and his shyness prevented him from making friends so easily, but this could be corrected if he were treated with respect and confidence, instead of being flattered or patronized.

The Prince was not heir to the throne, and all he needed at the time was to equip himself for a useful and active life in the modest position which it seemed he was to occupy. His love for geography and exploration, which was a characteristic Coburg inheritance, had been stirred by journeys with his parents to France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and later, with his father, to Greece and Constantinople. He pored over maps and even planned future expeditions. King Albert said, in later days, that, had he not been called to the throne, he might have become a good engineer. He might also, considering his knowledge of geography and his love of adventure, have devoted his life to hazardous explorations. This seems to have been noticed by some journalist who wrote that, if Leopold II ever wished to divide his heritage between his nephews, he could make Baudouin a wise king of the Belgians, and Albert a bold sovereign of the Congo.

Destiny, however, decreed otherwise. On January 25th,

1891, Prince Baudouin succumbed to the first epidemic of influenza which spread over Europe, and his brother was obliged to readjust his plans. In this first real grief, Prince Albert found no comfort in the realization of an ambition which in truth he had never entertained. At the age of sixteen he was compelled to abandon his favourite pursuits, to give up geography for mathematics, and the freedom he would have enjoyed for the less congenial tasks of a military and public career. He understood the full meaning of his parents' words, "a prince is merely a man who has more duties to fulfil than others."<sup>1</sup>

#### (B) *Heir to the Throne*

Thus, through a series of unexpected circumstances, the death of the Count of Hainault, and the loss of his elder brother, Prince Albert was called upon to prepare himself for the "trade of king," as it was called in the Royal Family, according to Frederick the Great's expression.

It was some years before Leopold II reconciled himself to the new situation, and fully recognized the sterling qualities of his successor. He had been sincerely attached to Baudouin, who had won all hearts by his genial qualities, and this fresh blow, reopening the old wound caused by the death of his son, accentuated that bitterness and aloofness which overshadowed the last twenty years of his long reign. He showed no hostility to the new heir-apparent, but did not associate him with his political and diplomatic work. He called him a "sealed envelope." Like many Brussels citizens, he compared unfavourably this tall, reserved and short-sighted youth, with the handsome and easy-mannered young man he had lost.

A few years later, however, when he had overcome his disappointment, King Leopold's attitude altered considerably. He was gratified by Albert's successes in his

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden: *Albert Ier*, chap. III.

Denuit: *Albert, Roi des Belges*, chaps I. and II.

military career. He wished his own *officier d'ordonnance*, Comte François Henricourt de Grunne to be attached to his nephew's household, and observed with pleasure the friendship which soon developed between them. It has been suggested that the King purposely prevented the Prince from taking a share in public affairs because he was too jealous of his prerogatives to brook any intervention. When the story of these years is written, it will be found that there were other obstacles to a close collaboration between Leopold II and Prince Albert. The Count of Flanders and his brother were not always in complete agreement, and these differences were aggravated by rivalries between the two households.

(1) According to established tradition, the Belgian Princes received a military education. Prince Albert had entered the military school two months before his brother's death. Since the heaviest responsibilities imposed upon the Sovereign by the Constitution was the preservation of the country's independence and the supreme command of the army, he now devoted all his energy to these new studies.

At the *École Militaire* he came into contact with several men who were to play an important part in his life. Colonel, later General Leman, the defender of Liège, was among his teachers, as was Lieutenant Francqui, who later distinguished himself by his exploration of Katanga, and the part he played at the head of the *Comité d'Alimentation*, during the German occupation. One of his companions became, before and during the War, his confidential military adviser, as Commandant Galet.

In his unobtrusive way the Prince soon won his fellow-students' confidence. As all pupils were given a nickname, he claimed the same privilege, and was dubbed *court mantel*, on account of the shortness of his military coat, and the careless way in which he wore his uniform. Being naturally studious, he soon got down to his new task. It is recorded that, when studying fortifications, he wished to see for

himself the practical difficulties of trench-making, and proceeded to wield a pickaxe and a shovel, in order to dig himself in. He had scarcely an inkling of the importance which this work would assume in modern warfare and in the defence of his own kingdom.

At college, as at home in the early years, the old spirit of insubordination still rebelled against the dictates of discipline, and the belief in the legend of the timid young Prince received a rude shock on several occasions. His fellow-students remember that, after a bout of marching and counter-marching, followed by a long lecture on untidiness at drill, the officer was staggered to hear a voice from the ranks shouting: "Shut up, can't you!" On inquiry, the Prince owned to the interruption. "I regret to hear it, Your Highness," answered the officer, "and regret still more not to be able to put you under arrest."

It is one of the drawbacks of real greatness to be unable to indulge in such insubordination without feeling some remorse, and this incident must very likely be connected with the fact that, on another occasion, the Prince allowed himself to be punished for a fault which he had not committed. When his *Directeur* asked him why he had not protested, he merely answered: "It is for you to order, Colonel, and for me to obey."<sup>1</sup>

He was successful in his studies, and it has only recently been disclosed that he came third in the final examination.

The same contradiction between a love of mischief and a sense of duty which appeared in the boy may be found in the young man. With the increasing weight of responsibility, these outbursts of high spirits took the form of improvised holidays, flying, motoring, mountaineering under the blessed shelter of incognito. Ceremony had already become the discipline which it was a joy and even a necessity to shake off from time to time. The boy's spirit was never broken, and the mature man retained to the end a craving for physical and moral relaxation. When

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Leclercq: *Albert, Roi des Belges*, chap. III.

etiquette was too tedious, the King felt an urgent need to escape its bonds, if only for a few hours. The very last adventure at Marche-les-Dames has no other explanation.

(2) After two years spent at the Military School, in December 1892, Prince Albert, as subaltern, joined the regiment of Grenadiers, recruited among the tallest men in the country. King Leopold, who presided over the ceremony, did not hide his proud satisfaction: "As long as you live, my dear nephew," he exclaimed, "remember the country's flag."

The Prince fraternized with his fellow-officers and was frequently seen with them in the cafés, after exercising his squad in the neighbourhood of Brussels. On several occasions he took part in manœuvres. It is reported that, in 1896, when a major, he distinguished himself in a raid which was more remarkable for its sportsmanship than for the soundness of its strategy. His party was defending the southern bank of the Meuse while the "enemy" was attacking from the north. The young major, with a company of Grenadiers, succeeded in crossing the stream, and ascended the hill opposite. On reaching the top, he found himself placed between the two lines of the attacking party. Had the action been a real one, the whole company would have been annihilated.

Although the Prince devoted several years to military studies and acquired some experience as an officer, his main interest was not in the army. The possibility of war was still remote and the future of the nation seemed to depend on the development of her industries and export trade. In these economic questions, Prince Albert shared the views of his uncle, and realized that, with her growing population—it was already the densest in Europe—Belgium must improve her methods of production and increase the importance of her foreign markets.

In order to form a personal opinion on the country's industrial situation, he undertook a systematic inspection of its main factories, preserving, as far as possible, his



1. Prince Albert at the age of fifteen, in the uniform of a student  
at the *École Militaire*. (Photo: Musée de l'Armée.)

incognito. The interest he had taken from early boyhood in mechanics was now renewed and he followed the latest development of engineering at home and abroad. He felt that the conditions of the workers needed serious improvement, and made a point of acquiring a practical knowledge of labour problems. He surprised Court circles by driving trains, and descending into coal-pits in a miner's suit. On one of these occasions he met, in a gallery, a miner of exceptional height and, confident in his disguise, remarked: "There is a man as tall as I am." To which the genuine miner retorted: "I have been in the Grenadiers like yourself, Your Highness."

The Prince then turned his attention to foreign lands and decided to make long trips abroad. As Duke of Brabant, Leopold II had been round the world, and the Prince wished to follow his example. At various functions where he represented his uncle, he took every opportunity of perfecting his knowledge of English, German and Russian life, visiting England in 1893, on the occasion of the marriage of King George, then Duke of York, Berlin and Luxemburg in 1895, and Russia in 1896, at the coronation of Nicolas II.

Two years later he started on his first voyage to America. He wished to pass unnoticed in order to pursue his observations at leisure, but was thwarted by the zeal of American journalists, so that part of his time was devoted to official functions and to receptions given in his honour. Foremost among these hospitable guests stood Mr. James H. Hill, the railway magnate, who received him at Seattle in a house specially prepared for this purpose. The friendships which the Prince made on these occasions were to bear fruit in later years, when those who remembered his visit became the advocates of the Belgian cause and the staunchest supporters of Belgian Relief during the War. He travelled from New York to San Francisco, stayed in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, pushing as far south as Louisiana and Texas. He returned by way of St. Paul and Chicago, through Canada.

Some of the stories told of the engineering skill he occasionally displayed may have been prompted by the reporters' desire to make good copy, but others were based on more reliable foundations. In Chicago, the foreman of a workshop, having to demonstrate before the Prince the working of a new agricultural machine, was so flustered that the experiment failed. The visitor calmly took his place and, after a few readjustments, himself gave the demonstration that he was expected to witness.

He took special interest in the working of the American railways and in the equipment of university laboratories. Studies, however, did not absorb all his time, and he always remembered with pleasure the trips which he took through the wilds of California and other States, where he could safely pass unnoticed and mix with travellers on equal terms.

In 1906, Prince Albert had come to the British Isles for the special purpose of examining their harbours. On several occasions he had visited Antwerp and was anxious to compare its equipment with that of London, Liverpool, Glasgow and Belfast, which he inspected in detail. He devoted special attention to the shipyards of the Cunard Line in Glasgow, and his eagerness for information and knowledge of the subject caused some surprise among the experts who escorted him.

(3) During the last nine years Prince Albert's prestige had grown steadily, while the estrangement between King Leopold and his people widened more and more. All those who had come into contact with the Prince in the army, the workshops, and at the official functions he attended, were struck by his genuine desire to acquire first-hand information on the main problems of Belgian life, and by the perfect simplicity of his manner. It is difficult to praise one public figure without criticizing another, and disparaging comparisons were frequently made between the Prince's modesty and kindness and the King's overbearing attitude and apparent heartlessness.

The Belgians are a domesticated people; they are extremely fond of home life, and are naturally inclined to grow sentimental about it. Their loyalty to the Crown is not merely based on political and patriotic considerations. As a wit said one day, "one of the most important articles of the Constitution which seems to have been forgotten, should read 'The King shall be the head of a happy family.'"

There had been an outburst of enthusiasm when Leopold I married Marie Louise d'Orleans, and the "good Queen" was not yet forgotten in Brussels. The hopes fostered by the marriage of the Duke of Brabant with the Archduchess Marie-Henriette had been disappointed, and people witnessed with dismay the disunion of their Sovereigns and the succession of fatal blows which were wrecking their family life: first, the death of the Count of Hainault, and later the unhappy marriage of his sisters, Princess Stéphanie and Princess Louise. The tragic death of the elder sister's husband, Archduke Rudolf von Hapsburg, and the domestic misfortunes of the younger, excited public gossip, and the relationship of the King with his third daughter, Princess Clémantine, was marred by his opposition to her marriage with Prince Victor Napoleon.

Leopold II resented these criticisms. He gave his people the benefit of his untiring energy and of his vast intelligence; his private life was no concern of theirs. He absented himself more and more from Brussels, and Court functions were reduced to a strict minimum. The Belgians felt themselves deprived not only of the glamour of royal festivities, but still more of the satisfaction of having a Royal Family which was the prototype of all Belgian homes. They wished not only to idealize their Sovereign, but also to cheer his Queen and to rejoice at the birth of young Princes. It was all part of their familiar conception of royalty, and there is little doubt that the old Monarch's quarrels with his children did him more harm, in the mind of the man in the street, than the political attacks to which he was subjected.

The announcement of Prince Albert's betrothal, in June 1900, with Princess Elisabeth, Duchess of Bavaria, was therefore greeted with a feeling of genuine relief. Popular satisfaction was still increased when it was learned that the union was the result of a mutual attachment, following a chance meeting in the Bavarian Alps. This was rightly considered as a proof that reasons of State, which had previously exerted such a disastrous influence on the happiness of the Royal Family had played no part in the engagement. At last love asserted its right; the royal romance appeared a good omen for the future. "What makes me specially happy," declared the Countess of Flanders, "is that my children have been able to marry according to the choice of their hearts." These words were echoed in every Belgian home. People heard with pleasure that the Princess's father, Duke Charles Theodore, nephew of the famous King Ludwig, Wagner's patron, was a distinguished oculist, and had founded an hospital where he attended his patients, helped by his wife and daughter. The latter had become an experienced nurse and was, besides, a passionate lover of music. When it was noticed later that Princess Elisabeth had not mastered the difficulties of the deep curtsey introduced by Queen Marie-Henriette, people remarked that she was more expert in dressing a wound than in making a *révérence*.

A distinguished Belgian writer, M. Van Zype, who attended the betrothal festivities, wrote a glowing account of the intimate life in the Bavarian castle of Possenhofen, in which we recognize the familiar time-table which had apparently become the passport of every good prince and princess: "It is the home of a good father of family, of a modest and happy household, adorned merely by a few treasured mementoes and children's portraits. On the wall of the drawing-room can still be seen the time-table of the lessons, followed week by week by the children. Every day the programme of the young Princess's studies was thus regulated. Her relaxation was walking in the Park, riding

and playing the violin, for Princess Elisabeth is a good musician. Life at Possenhofen is calm and without pomp. . . .”

The writer’s account of the bridal banquet, held on October 2nd 1900, made no less pleasant reading. He remarked that Princess Elisabeth, who was sitting beside the King of Rumania, devoted all her attention to the bridegroom: “I notice that the little Princess scarcely helps herself, and constantly speaks to Prince Albert, who nervously breaks his bread whenever the King of Rumania talks to his bride. . . . They are together, and it is plain to all beholders that this Prince and Princess are indeed two lovers, for whom, at this moment, nothing exists outside themselves. . . . They are just a man and a maid, and kings, duchesses, generals, ladies-in-waiting disappear. They humanize everything by the simplicity of their love.”

The marriage was solemnized in Munich and, three days later, the Princess made her triumphal entry into Brussels.

Several writers have criticized the wave of sentimental popularity which swept over the country on this occasion, and which was revived at the birth of the Prince’s three children: Leopold in 1901, Charles in 1903, and Marie-José in 1906. They have derided the way in which the people praised everything done by the popular Prince, and the still more popular Princess, while they misinterpreted the old King’s words and actions. These critics have dwelt on the ingratitude of the Belgians, who forgot the great achievements and the patriotic devotion of their Monarch, and treasured the homely picture of the devoted young couple surrounded with babies. While paying due homage to the sterling qualities of the Princess, who worked untiringly among the poor, and of the Prince, who patiently pursued his studies and travels in preparation for his destiny, they have belittled the enthusiasm with which every small incident of their life was magnified, while no sympathy was shown to the lonely King who had laboured incessantly for the country’s greatness, and realized a work

comparable only to the achievements of the greatest European Statesmen of the nineteenth century.

This attitude shows little understanding of popular mentality and of the fundamental principles of modern kingship, which made the Sovereign not "King of Belgium," but "King of the Belgians," and according to which he owed his power to a free people who had chosen him and his house to reign over them. Under this régime, popularity cannot safely be scorned and opposition overridden. The links between king and people must be strengthened by sympathy and understanding, so that, even when an unpopular decision has to be taken, the sovereign's authority remains unshaken. The tokens of sympathy which Prince Albert and Princess Elisabeth were constantly giving to their future subjects were no doubt of small importance compared with the great achievements of Leopold II, but the common man is often more grateful for an act of kindness which affects his individual life than for an immense benefit which will only accrue to his children or to his children's children.

The chief difficulty of modern government is, perhaps, to strike a just balance between a far-sighted policy, for which the country is not always prepared, and a short-sighted policy, which sacrifices the future to the present. If, in later years, King Albert won so easily the confidence of his people, it was because he never forced his views at an inopportune moment. He was fond of repeating in his speeches that the nation was "mistress of her destiny," and free to make her own decisions. After his accession, he did not even choose as his title "Albert I," but preferred to remain "Albert of Belgium."<sup>1</sup>

(4) Another reason for the popularity enjoyed by the Prince and Princess was the interest they showed in their country's intellectual life. Artists and scholars, in spite of their small numbers, exert a considerable influence. They are the teachers of the younger generation, and their views

<sup>1</sup> *Revue belge des Livres*, etc. . . . octobre-décembre, 1934, p. 240.

are shared by the reading public. This was particularly true of Belgium in those days, when many writers and critics were obliged to make a living by journalism. King Leopold provoked the antagonism of the "intelligentsia," because, absorbed by his colonial and financial enterprises, he paid only scant attention to the efforts made to develop a national culture. It was often said that he considered music a "disagreeable noise," and he belonged to a generation which did not believe in Belgian literature, as distinct from French.

In spite of official neglect, Belgium became in the early years of the twentieth century, a most active, intellectual and artistic centre. Painters such as Laermans and Claus, sculptors such as Meunier and Rousseau, began to be appreciated abroad. Belgian writers took such an important part in the French symbolist movement that some critics protested against this "foreign invasion," which, according to them, threatened the pure traditions of French literature. Maeterlinck and Verhaeren were already names to conjure with. In the realm of music, the Brussels Conservatoire and Opera House enjoyed a wide reputation, and while the worship of Wagner swept away the younger generation, Ysaye and other interpreters were revealing to the public the works of the Liégeois César Franck, the founder of the modern French School. The intellectual movement was no longer centripetal but had become centrifugal, and the Belgians, after admiring for so long the productions of others, were creating works endowed with a distinct national character. Belgian traditions were known to date from the early Middle Ages and the Belgian modern State to have risen in 1830; people were now beginning to talk of the "Belgian soul."

Far from being encouraged at home, the disinterested efforts of writers and artists still suffered from the prejudice of a large number of compatriots who refused to believe that there could be any prophet in their own country. Prince Albert and Princess Elisabeth, on the contrary, showed from the first a keen interest in the artistic life of

the Capital. Not only did the Princess attend the principal concerts and visit picture exhibitions, even those of the "advanced school," but she received in the intimacy of her home a number of distinguished musicians, writers and artists, and the lead she gave considerably altered the attitude of Brussels society towards national culture.

(5) Ever since the campaign which, in 1893, resulted in the revision of the Constitution and the extension of the franchise, a deep gulf had existed between the Monarchy and the Socialists. The latter proclaimed, on every occasion, their republican principles, and believed that the opposition which they encountered in Parliament was mainly due to the King who, through his attitude on the military question, became for them the embodiment of the "forces of reaction." When King Leopold had opened the Session in 1892, he had been subjected to such abuse on the part of the Socialist deputies that he had decided never to set foot in Parliament again. It was his last speech from the throne. The Socialist press exploited the revelations of the Congo Reform Association, and taunted the King with his family difficulties. The attempt upon his life, in November 1902, by an Italian anarchist provoked a certain reaction, but his unpopularity among the working classes lingered on until his death.

In these circumstances, the rôle of heir-apparent was particularly difficult. Not being called upon to play an active part in public affairs, Prince Albert could not alter his uncle's uncompromising attitude, and it was obviously impossible for him, at that stage, to speak or act in his defence. As in all important decisions which he took in later years, he did not allow himself to be influenced by partisanship. He did not shut himself up in indifferent aloofness, neither did he nurse his popularity. He contented himself with perfecting his studies, but showed, nevertheless, in an unobtrusive manner, the sympathy he felt for the condition of the working man.

The Prince and later the King was evidently attracted,

and to a certain extent influenced, by the social theories of Ernest Solvay, a self-made man who had gathered a large fortune through his inventions, and founded the *Institut Sociologique* attached to the University of Brussels. Together with his collaborator Waxweiler, Solvay was convinced that the solution of the social question could be found neither in Liberalism nor in Socialism, but in the application to politics of scientific principles. In his *Principes d'orientation sociale*, published in 1904, he defended the idea that "productivism," that is to say the increase in bulk and quality of economic production, is the first aim to be pursued by a good government. The "right to live" of the incapable and of those who are forcibly unemployed is to be recognized, but the State must improve the "capacity" for work of all citizens through an adequate preparation. For this purpose it must avail itself of fresh resources, to be derived from heavy death duties which will progressively reduce and ultimately eliminate "capitalist heredity." He proposed a new formula: "Each according to his capacity of production," and opposed to the socialistic claim of complete equality the principle of "equality at the start." He also favoured a system under which the State would act as a trustee for the community and invest the citizens' savings in reliable commercial and industrial enterprises. His scheme was to suppress the abuses and injustice caused by the capitalist system without sacrificing individualism and private initiative.

It is impossible to say exactly to what extent the young Prince shared these views. In later years he certainly felt that the problem was not only economic but also moral and psychological. He never ceased to support social reforms aiming at improving the people's condition and education, and never wavered in his belief that the interests of Labour and Capital could be and ought to be reconciled.

His personal knowledge of Belgian industrial life had convinced him that social problems would play an important part in Belgian life in the near future, and deserved as much attention as military defence. After leaving his

regiment, he devoted most of his time to the study of these questions and, with an instinctive distrust of pure theories, endeavoured to apply some of the principles he had already evolved to an experiment which was destined to yield fruitful results.

In 1905, at his own expense and without any outside help or advice, he founded *L’Oeuvre de l’Ibis*. While staying at Ostend he had been struck by the unfortunate condition of Belgian fishermen, who vainly struggled against their richer and better equipped foreign competitors. Their small fishing smacks were powerless against the steam fleet used by Dutch and British fisheries. But the Belgians were traditionally attached to their sailing boats; they had to be educated.

The Prince’s foundation was partly an orphanage, and partly a training ship. At the age of twelve, the boys were initiated into their trade on three model boats, provided with auxiliary motor engines (the first of this type in Belgian ports) and, after a few years’ training, the crews were given the necessary credit to acquire an up-to-date ship which was worked on co-operative methods. The Prince himself made several cruises and soon acquired the reputation of being the “fishermen’s protector.”

This scheme, no doubt, fell short of the heroic dreams of his youth, but it came within the scope of his new duties as heir to the throne. It is reported that a well-known explorer suggested to the Prince that he might himself take part in an exploration in the Antarctic. “I wish it were possible,” he answered, “but an heir-presumptive gets little fun.”

(6) Apart from these evident proofs of the Prince’s concern in the condition of the poor, the vast majority of his people were drawn to him and to the Princess by their remarkable simplicity of manner. All those who were invited to their house were immediately put at their ease and placed on a footing of friendliness and even familiarity. They were agreeably surprised at discovering that the

future Sovereign was far more easy to approach than a great many people of lower social standing. Those not versed in the subtleties of etiquette were never made aware of any breach they had committed. Frequently the children were introduced to the visitors, and their presence helped still further to banish the atmosphere of formality.

The change from the rue de la Science to the Royal Palace made no difference. When Maeterlinck called, he was asked to kiss the children, and the King explained: "In later years I should like them to remember having met you." After the War, Claude Farrère, who was crossing Belgium, received a telephone message at his hotel asking him to call at the Palace. On a previous occasion they had talked politics, now they only talked literature, "discussing the latest books and also some old ones." All at once the King rose: "Don't get up; my wife also wishes to see you, and she imagines that you can waste the whole afternoon with us. Wait a moment, I am going to fetch her."

There are so many records of such visits that it would be tedious to quote them all. It is enough to say that many were paid by writers and artists, who were somewhat flustered and embarrassed when answering the royal command, and were greatly relieved and delighted after having answered it.

One of the reasons why the King liked to be among the poor and to talk to them was that they were usually ignorant of the dreaded rules of ceremony. He was sorely disappointed when they greeted him with elaborate salutations, and he once rebuked one of his gardeners who kept on bowing to him, saying: "My friend, I am only a man like yourself."

The Belgians were grateful for this broad sense of humanity and cordial *bonhomie*. Being themselves somewhat easy-going, they noticed with amused pride the unconventionality of their future Sovereigns. The Princess, who was untiring in her charitable works, was seen in the poorest quarters of Brussels, followed only by one lady-in-

waiting; and these were troubled times when the majority of the slum-dwellers were Socialists and Republicans, and when the Capital was repeatedly the scene of loud political demonstrations. She was specially interested in the care of small children, and it was owing to her influence that children's welfare, hitherto somewhat neglected, made rapid progress throughout Belgium. People said that if any man had attempted to be rude to her, he would have been faced with the formidable anger of all the good wives in the tenement. She was not strong in health, and it was known that some of these visits were made against doctors' orders. The "little Princess," as she was called, was already a power in the State.

In 1905, M. Sigogne, who had been Prince Albert's teacher in former days, published an essay entitled *Socialisme et Monarchie*, in which he contended that there was no contradiction between Socialistic and Monarchical principles. The fact that the Prince accepted the dedication of this work caused some stir in Brussels, and people wondered if these ideas of the tutor were shared by his former pupil.

It was already felt that the future King had decided to reduce to a minimum the formalities of Court life, and to apply in the letter and in the spirit the fine principle taught him in his youth, that a Prince "is merely a man who has more duties to fulfil than others."

The debate which took place in the Chamber, after the death of the Count of Flanders, on the question of the Prince's State allowance, showed the change of spirit which began to affect even the staunchest opponents of kingship. Those who opposed the motion were at pains to explain that their decision was prompted, not by a personal hostility to the Prince, but merely by their antagonism to the Government. A Christian Democrat declared that the Prince was "compassionate and generous-hearted," and gave some concrete examples of his generosity. A Socialist praised him for the interest he took in social science, and added that "he kept himself informed of the workers' movement and

tried to fit himself for the position he would one day occupy." The tide had already begun to turn.

(7) Although Prince Albert could no longer hope to realize the projects of his boyhood, he nevertheless pursued his educational tours, and was able to indulge from time to time in his favourite sports.

As a child, he had roved with delight through the wild hills of the Ardennes, in the neighbourhood of Les Amerois. As soon as he was allowed to use a bicycle, about 1890, he went for long rides in the neighbourhood of Brussels, accompanied by his tutor, who was, however, unable to keep pace with his impetuous pupil. A substitute had to be found who experienced anxious moments owing to what was already called, in those days, "the Prince's recklessness." Later he discarded the bicycle for the motorcycle and became, of course, an expert driver.

But the true passion of his life was mountaineering. As a boy he had discovered, in his father's library, a collection of the Alpine Club Journal which had awakened his interest in snow-capped mountains. In 1905, he attended a lecture given by M. Lefébure at the Brussels' *Cercle Artistique*, in which the climber described his recent experiences. The lecturer was surprised to receive, on the next day, a visit from Jungbluth who asked him to initiate the Prince into his favourite sport. The first expedition took place, in the Tyrol, in October 1906. On his arrival at Cortina d'Ampezzo, the Prince announced that "his wife" had wished to accompany him: "*Ma femme a voulu m'accompagner*," and the Princess shared the joys and the perils of the ascents made during this journey.<sup>1</sup> This was the beginning of a series of adventurous holidays in the Alps.

It is remarkable that this sport, in which man has to contend alone against natural difficulties, exerted a greater fascination on King Albert than motoring, or even aviation. M. Lefébure insists on the moral value which his royal

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, Mars 1934.

companion attached to his favourite sport. For him it was not only a healthy exercise and the only means of contemplating nature in its wild glory, but the realization that a man surmounting obstacles, without the help of any mechanical device, exerted his full power and trained his energy and his self-command to the utmost. The quality of the sport must be judged by its philosophy and its educational value. A summit was only worth reaching because it stood as the emblem of perfection.

In his wish to rely as much as possible on his own resources, the King later discarded the services of trained guides and preferred to associate with climbers of all nationalities, who had acquired a special knowledge of the group of mountains which he wished to tackle. For this amateur engineer the finest of all sports was always the sport pursued with unaided strength.

(8) Prince Albert started for his first journey to the Congo in April 1909.

A great deal has been written about the Prince's attitude towards the administration of the Congo under the Leopoldian régime, the outspoken remonstrances which he made to King Leopold, and the way the latter opposed his visit to the Colony in order to prevent his interference in colonial affairs. These assumptions remain unsupported by historical evidence.

That the Prince must have wished to visit the Congo at an earlier date seems certain from all we know of his love of adventure, inquiring mind and devotion to his country. He no doubt realized that deficiencies in the administration were partly due to the fact that its Chief had never journeyed through the Colony, and was therefore unable to form a first-hand opinion of the situation. The best of maps is not a stretch of country, and an official report is only a poor substitute for a personal inspection.

Unable to visit the Congo himself—he was sixty-nine years of age in 1904—the King had sent a Commission of

Inquiry. Its report, published the next year, had been well received by Belgian opinion, and steps had been taken to remedy the abuses which it censured. In 1906 Parliament had expressed the wish to take over the Colony, according to King Leopold's previous offer, and conditions were scarcely favourable for an official voyage during the prolonged negotiations which followed. There were thus excellent reasons for the postponement of the Prince's journey until the time when the Congo should become a Belgian colony, under the control of Parliament. King Albert's later declarations lead us to believe that, if he seized the first opportunity of realizing his plan, it was to some extent for the purpose of countering more efficiently the campaign which was being pursued in Great Britain and elsewhere, even after the reforms proposed by the Commission of Inquiry had been adopted.

During four months, after visiting the mining centres of South Africa, Prince Albert followed the great river from the Katanga to the sea. He made a point of visiting remote stations at a great distance from any waterway, following native paths and sleeping under his tent. He questioned Europeans and natives and listened to all complaints, covering a distance of 720 miles on foot, cycle or horseback. He took a special interest in sleeping-sickness which was already rampant at the time, and during the return journey helped to nurse a Belgian and an Englishman who were suffering from the disease. Princess Elisabeth came as far as Teneriffe to meet him.

On his arrival at Antwerp, on August 16th, he asserted the country's intention of improving the situation of the natives as well as the equipment of the Colony. "It is by raising the moral condition of the natives as well as their material situation, by fighting the evils to which they are subjected, by multiplying as fast as possible the means of communication, that we shall ensure the future of the Congo." A few months later, in his Accession speech, he dwelt again on the responsibility implied by colonization. "The nation, of her own free-will, wishing to fulfil the work

of her King, has just assumed sovereignty over the Congo territories. Conscious of her duties, and with a firm purpose, she has outlined the colonial policy which she wishes to follow. It is a policy of humanity and progress. To a justice-loving people a colonizing mission can only be one of high civilization. By accepting it loyally, a small country shows itself great. . . . Belgium has always fulfilled her promises and, when she undertakes to apply to the Congo a programme worthy of herself, no one has the right to doubt her word."

Had not the Prince recently travelled throughout the Congo, inspecting every important post, interviewing native chiefs, visiting hospitals, schools, and missions, the young King could not have spoken in such a firm tone. He knew—and his Colonial Minister, M. Renkin, who went to Africa at the same time, shared his opinion—that the abuses had been grossly exaggerated, that the situation had greatly improved since 1906, and that the colonial administration would apply the new regulations faithfully. Not for the last time, he was determined to show the world that the good faith of Belgium could not be questioned.

Fresh reforms were at once introduced, lightening the burdens of taxation and gradually abolishing trade monopolies. Speaking at Tervueren, in April 1910, at the inauguration of the new colonial museum, the King outlined an important economic programme for the Colony, insisting on the paramount importance of means of communication. "Since the completion of the Bas-Congo railway little progress had been made." Belgium should follow the example of the great colonizing nations and make the necessary sacrifices. "There are scarcely any railways in Africa," he added, "which, after a certain number of years, do not pay their way, while indirectly providing the Colony with considerable additional resources. . . . What we lack in the Congo is . . . a special railway policy."

The Treaty of Cession granted King Leopold II and his successors a special fund of 50 million francs, to be paid in annuities of 3,800,000 and later 3,500,000 francs. King

Albert decided to devote these resources to the introduction of modern inventions in the Colony. As early as 1911 he promoted the establishment of wireless stations, the use of aeroplanes and hydroplanes and the building of a model motor-ship, the *Belgica*. At the same time he appealed to young Belgian doctors to fight sleeping-sickness, and funds were raised by the Queen for the building and equipment of a special sanatorium at Leopoldville.

Meanwhile, the British Government, following the persistent attacks of the Congo Reform Association, had not yet recognized the Colony and Belgian public opinion had been alarmed by the Franco-German Convention of November 1911. According to this arrangement, France ceded to Germany important districts in the French Congo, and agreed that if, at a later date, some territorial changes occurred in the Congo basin, the signatories of the Berlin Act—including Germany—should be called into consultation. King Albert knew that, during the negotiations which had led to the agreement, M. Caillaux, the French Minister, in his anxiety to satisfy German demands, had suggested that France might, by secret treaty, cede to Germany her right of pre-emption over the Belgian Congo. Although the plan had not matured, since France could not obviously make such a concession without consulting Belgium, the King was anxious to impress upon the French and British Governments the importance he attached to the preservation of the Belgian Colony which seemed threatened by German ambition.

The following extract from M. Poincaré's memoirs shows how, even on State occasions, the King never lost sight of the problems which haunted his mind. After a banquet, offered by President Fallières to the Belgian Sovereigns when they visited Paris in the spring of 1913, King Albert had a long talk with the French Prime Minister: "He spoke to me of the alarm caused in Belgium, during last autumn, by Press polemics concerning the right of pre-emption; he thanked me for the declarations I had made

in the Senate on a subject which had awakened some susceptibilities in his country; he told me that Belgium was now reassured. She only wished that the British Government would recognize, as we had done already, the annexation of the Congo by the Belgian State. He asked me very tactfully if we could not exert a favourable influence in London. Happy to be able to give Belgium a token of sympathy, I willingly promised the King to make our opinion and our hopes known to the British Cabinet. Not a word was said concerning a provocation of Germany against Belgium or France. . . . The Queen spoke of music and painting, and we forgot politics."

The Colony was recognized by Great Britain a few weeks later. Within four years the reforms had proved so efficient that the most biased opponents of the Belgian administration had been silenced.

### (C) *The First Years of the Reign*

(1) Some writers take a peculiar delight in "strong situations," and it must be admitted that the last years of King Leopold's reign lend themselves to sensational drama. What a fine scene could be written round the deathbed of the old, disappointed Sovereign, and what a striking contrast could be drawn between him and the popular heir to the throne! But it is only very occasionally that the broad outlines of a melodrama can be found in history; reality is more subtle than fiction.

While it may be said that King Leopold never bestowed on Prince Albert the affection he had for Prince Baudouin, and that his domineering nature precluded him from sharing his power with anyone, there is no foundation for the common belief that he grudged the Prince the popularity which he had himself lost. On the contrary, he was often delighted at his heir's success and ability. In a confidential talk with his friend, M. Wiener, he declared one day that princes who possess the heart of true kings are able to achieve great

things through heredity. "I had the happiness to possess a remarkable father. I am trying to follow the advice he gave me; in my turn I am handing it to the young man who will do well." "Sire," replied M. Wiener, "I am glad to hear these words." "Do not doubt it, he chose freely to undertake this journey to America, and he has benefited from it. When his day comes, I trust that he will prove worthy of his country."<sup>1</sup>

In the King's Will, Prince Albert appears as the only member of his family whose company he wished to share to the end: "I want to be buried in the early morning, without any pomp. Except for my nephew Albert and the members of my household, I forbid anybody to follow my remains." During the last months of his life, the King had several conversations with his heir, which the latter had no doubt in mind whenever he spoke of his predecessor.

On the day of his Accession, in his speech before Parliament, King Albert dwelt on the wisdom of the Sovereign who had worked for unity among his people and achieved his noble ambition of leaving Belgium "more beautiful and greater" than he had found it. He insisted on the late King's foresight, boldness and tenacity, which enabled him to endow the country with a large African colony. "His vast designs were carried out with an unshakeable purpose, which, on several important occasions, happy or critical, asserted itself; the country then was proud of her King."

It is not difficult to read the reproach implied by these last words, which were addressed to those who, after praising the deceased monarch's successes, when he was still popular, had so unfairly ignored his finer qualities when his star was setting. This was not merely the conventional homage paid, as a matter of course, but the expression of sincere feelings, which King Albert went out of his way to repeat during his reign, in Belgium and abroad. With his natural generosity, he thought no doubt with La Rochefoucauld that it was "the right of great men to

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Daye: *Léopold II*, p. 477.

have great faults," and never allowed these faults to blind him to the virtues associated with them.

(2) The popular demonstration which greeted the young Sovereign's Accession to the throne, on December 23rd 1909, showed how much the people had remained loyal to the monarchical principle and to the dynasty. The young King, riding between the Duke of Connaught and Prince Francis Joseph, Queen Elisabeth's brother, headed the procession, followed by the Royal Family in State coaches. The genuine enthusiasm of the crowd contrasted with the lack of reverence only too apparent at the State funeral which had taken place on the previous day. Burgomaster Max voiced the opinion of his compatriots when he greeted his Sovereign, not only as his King, but as a "citizen enthroned in the sincere and profound affection of his fellow-citizens, who had conquered the hearts of the people by the simplicity, dignity and nobility of his life."

There is no formal coronation ceremony in Belgium. The heir-apparent becomes king after taking the solemn oath required by the Constitution. According to the ceremonial adopted on previous occasions, this oath is taken from a throne raised in the hall of the Chamber, in front of the members of the two Houses, the Ministers, magistrates, dignitaries of the Church and the Diplomatic Corps. The Queen and her children witnessed the ceremony surrounded by the members of the Royal Family and by the representatives of foreign States. The firm tone in which the King outlined his colonial policy was particularly noticed, but the outstanding passage of his speech referred to the Sovereign's conception of the part he wished to play in Belgian political life:

"Gentlemen, I have a very clear conception of my task. The duty of princes is dictated to their conscience by the spirit of their people, for if the Throne has its prerogatives, it has above all its responsibilities. The Sovereign must hold himself with entire loyalty above parties. He must

preserve the nation's vital forces. Constantly attentive to the country's voice and watching with solicitude over the lives of the poor, he must be the servant of Right and the mainstay of social peace.

"May God help me to fulfil this mission! For myself, I shall always be ready to second the efforts of those who work for the country's greatness and who, filled with the spirit of concord and social progress, raise the intellectual and moral level of the nation, develop education and instruction and ensure greater well-being to the mass of the people.

"I love my country; the Queen shares my feelings of unalterable fidelity to Belgium; we instil them in the hearts of our children and awaken in them, at the same time, the love of their native land, of family, of work, of goodness. These are the qualities which make nations strong.

"Gentlemen, the reception which has been given me touches me profoundly. I see in it a proof of confidence which honours and sustains me. I shall endeavour to deserve it. In taking the constitutional oath, I swear to myself and to Belgium scrupulously to fulfil my duties, and to devote all my strength and all my life to the service of the country."

The effect produced by this speech was remarkable, not so much for the cheers given by the Monarchists, as for the attitude of the Socialists, who had, under the previous reign, so loudly asserted their republican principles. Opinion in Parliament and in the Press was practically unanimous. It was noticed that the King had referred to Leopold I as to a Sovereign, "chosen by the free representatives of the Nation," who had been the "respectful guardian of the country's institutions."

When he spoke of the Sovereign listening to "the voice of the country," and watching over the interests of the poor, he certainly had in mind the recent agitation for reform and the extension of the franchise. If he did not approve of this agitation, he was not unsympathetic to the motives which prompted it.

His respect for the Constitution was in the dynastic tradition, but while the late king had borne some of these restrictions with evident impatience, he seemed to accept them without any reservation. It was for the Belgians to decide, he could only warn and advise. Without necessarily being a democrat, he accepted democracy as a fact and did not wish, on principle, to hamper its development. He stood above parties, not only in religious and philosophical differences, but also in this vital social question, and even the republican principles of the extremists did not affect his impartiality.

Hitherto, Belgian kings had succeeded in balancing the scales between Liberals and Catholics. He declared himself ready to pursue the same policy between Capital and Labour. He appealed to all devoted patriots, all men of goodwill, without any distinction, to help him in his task. His only opponents were those who, instead of working for unity and for the preservation of the "country's vital forces," attempted to undermine her foundations and to disintegrate the State which preserved her independence.

Arts and sciences had not been forgotten. The King spoke of Belgium's prosperity, but he added that "riches create responsibilities for countries as for individuals," and that "alone the intellectual and moral forces of a nation allow her prosperity to bear fruit. . . . The Belgian people will preserve intact the sacred patrimony created by the work of so many generations, and march on towards the pacific conquests of labour and science, while the artists and writers of Flanders and Wallonia will scatter their masterpieces along our path." These words caused great satisfaction among the intellectuals, and an enthusiastic politician declared that Belgium was "at the dawn of a reign directed towards the Arts," which does not seem good prose and makes strange reading in the light of later events. But King Albert's meaning went much deeper. Not only did he warn the nation against a purely materialistic outlook and oppose spiritual to economic values, but he already

foreshadowed an idea which he expressed more clearly towards the end of his life, when he insisted on the vital necessity of disinterested research work. It was generally agreed, at that time, that industrial prosperity depended on applied science, but the intimate connection between the latter and pure science was not yet fully recognized.

On such a formal occasion, the young King—he was thirty-five years of age—could not reveal his inner thoughts, but the Accession Speech contains, nevertheless, two principles of outstanding value: the extension of political activity to economic and social questions, and the inclusion of moral and intellectual, as well as of material, progress in the national commonwealth. Leopold II had already warned his compatriots that prosperity was not enough, when he wished them to adopt urgent measures for the country's defence. King Albert added that a prosperity which did not improve the workers' standard of life and did not produce spiritual as well as material results, would never "raise Belgium to a rank worthy of herself." Greatness no longer depended on flourishing industries and the acquisition of a vast colony, but on the happiness of the people, and the successful efforts of artists and scientists.

(3) It was noticed that during these brilliant ceremonies, and in spite of the cheers of his people, King Albert retained an extraordinary gravity, and it was thought at the time that his over-scrupulous conscience was oppressed by the weight of fresh responsibilities. The Sovereign had other causes for anxiety, and knew that, in spite of the official compliments paid to him, his reign had not begun "under the most happy auspices." The reconciliation of Great Britain and Russia had finally divided the guarantors of Belgian neutrality into two opposite camps. The German danger was increasing. The recent military reform, extorted by Leopold II from a reluctant Parliament, was totally inadequate, and Belgium was a prey to social and political dissensions.

The King's first task was to renew relations with foreign countries and thus draw Belgium away from the isolation into which she had fallen during the last years of the previous reign. Accompanied by the Queen, he paid a series of visits to Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Luxemburg and The Hague. These visits were returned during the following years, and especially during the Exhibition of 1910, when Brussels became a centre of international interest.

The *Exposition Universelle* was opened by King Albert on April 23rd. With his mind full of apprehensions for the future, he took this opportunity of dwelling on the pacific character of the occasion: "By its international aspect," he said, "the Exhibition has a human significance, for it appears as an imposing manifestation of the pacific struggle in the fields of labour and progress, in which the nations tend more and more to compete with each other. It is a work of peace and prosperity in which free competition has replaced the armed conflicts of former days." He was aware of the struggle that was going on at the time in Germany, between those who believed in "pacific penetration," and the military party bent on the use of force. The wish, however, was father to the thought, and the King felt it, for he added in conclusion: "This, at least, is the wish which I have the right to express openly at the beginning of my reign, and before the representatives of the States friendly to Belgium. I do not doubt that it will find an echo in all hearts." This appeal was heard by the German Minister; a few months later the Kaiser himself came to answer it.<sup>1</sup>

The recent death of King Edward prevented members of the British Royal Family from visiting Brussels, as they had intended to do, but ex-President Roosevelt spent several days in the Capital and was received by King Albert, who had preserved his interest in American affairs. They had many friends in common, and revived memories of the Prince's journey, twelve years before. The attitude taken by Mr. Roosevelt at the beginning of the War is

well known, and there is no doubt that the friendship he entertained for the King of the Belgians inspired his eloquent plea for early intervention. Some Belgians still remember the lecture delivered by the ex-President before the Belgian Sovereign and a distinguished gathering, and the informal way in which he addressed his audience, sometimes as "gentlemen," and more frequently as "my friends."

(4) It will later be explained how the King's activity in foreign affairs was hampered by his wish to remain strictly neutral in the approaching conflict,<sup>1</sup> and how he devoted most of his time to military preparations.<sup>2</sup> He was frequently disturbed in this work by internal politics which entirely absorbed his people's attention.

M. Janson, his last Minister of Justice, has given an interesting account of the influence the Sovereign exerted over his ministerial Council during the last period of his reign. It applies equally well to pre-War days, for the King's conception of his constitutional duties never varied. He wished to act only as adviser and, in times of crisis, as arbiter between contending parties. His action depended on his moral and intellectual influence: "It was impossible," writes M. Janson, "to come near the King without feeling the prestige of his personality, and without being filled with admiration for his scrupulous conscience and his wide knowledge. He never ceased to add to his store of information, which he classified, and from which he inferred certain guiding principles. . . . He grasped all the problems, great and small, affecting the country. . . . Whenever a new question arose on the political, economic, or social horizon, he at once made inquiries in order to find out how its solution might affect the interests of Belgium, and for him Belgium was the sum total of all Belgians. . . . No one better than he possessed that sense of public interest, that instinctive understanding of certain needs, that presence which characterizes true Statesmen. . . . In the

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 142-147.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 147 and 152.

ministerial Council, he exerted the influence of a chief. This influence did not impose itself through the expression of some decisive and dictatorial opinion; it insinuated itself through his words, uttered somewhat slowly, as if he were in search of a more precise form, and accentuated by a few constructive gestures. When he spoke, the King always looked as if he wished to build something.”<sup>1</sup>

Comte de Lichtervelde, who had many opportunities of following his methods of work, noticed that “when he had ministers little disposed to consult him he contented himself with watching their activity, remaining for a time silent.” This passive attitude was not a sign of weakness; it sprang from a genuine desire to abide by the Constitution, and avoid any conflict which might, at a later date, hamper his movements. As a general rule, this method served him well, for if some error was made, he was in a much stronger position to correct it or check its consequences. If in the conduct of military operations, acting as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, King Albert displayed the utmost resolution and was even taxed with obstinacy, in the normal government of the country, he showed himself broadly tolerant and preserved a remarkable adaptability. He was in no doubt about the result to be achieved, but he kept an open mind as to the means to be used to achieve it.

(5) When he came to the throne, the Catholic Party, which had governed the country since 1884, was still in power, under the Prime Minister, M. Schollaert. The franchise, known as *vote plural*, adopted in 1893, granted additional votes to fathers of families, to those who had completed their education, and to those who paid a certain amount of taxation. Under this restricted system the Socialists had made rapid progress, and, together with the Liberals, formed a strong opposition in the Chamber. In 1910, the Catholic majority was reduced to six votes. The Opposition was nevertheless disappointed and started a cam-

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

paign for universal suffrage. The opening of Parliament was the occasion for a popular demonstration, during which the Queen showed as much tact as presence of mind. Petitions were thrown into her carriage, but she drove on unconcerned, displaying neither displeasure nor alarm.

The adversaries of the Government were divided between the Liberals, representing a section of the bourgeois class, and the Socialists representing industrial Labour. They combined to oppose M. Schollaert's new education bill.

This bill, while making education compulsory, introduced, at the same time, a system of grants, to be made to both State and private (Catholic) schools in proportion to the number of pupils. The principle of compulsion was welcomed by the Opposition, but the system of grants provoked violent criticisms. Heated debates in the Chamber were followed by demonstrations in the streets. After consulting the party leaders, and ascertaining that a number of Catholic Statesmen were not in favour of a régime which might lead to school recruiting, and provoke serious difficulties, the King interfered and prevented a dangerous crisis by altering his Cabinet without waiting for an adverse vote of the Chamber. The Opposition rejoiced, while the Catholics protested, but events soon showed that the Sovereign was determined to maintain a strict impartiality, and that his decisions were only inspired by the interests of the country as a whole. He had chosen, as new Prime Minister, a member of the former Government, Baron de Broqueville, who, not being entirely absorbed in internal affairs, was more alive than some of his colleagues to the increasing danger of the international situation, and prepared to support his plans for improving the defences of the country.

Meanwhile the struggle for the extension of the franchise went on. The street demonstrations having caused some alarm among the moderates, the elections of 1912 had largely increased the Catholic majority. This defeat consolidated the union of the opposition parties, and a new campaign was launched in favour of universal suffrage

"pure and simple." The Socialists were convinced that plural voting was the sole reason for the check they had suffered and, knowing the King's interest in labour conditions and in social reforms, hoped to obtain his support. They again used the methods employed in 1910, and in April 1913 proclaimed a General Strike which entirely paralysed the principal industries of the country, 370,000 workers downing tools at the appointed time.

King Albert, however, did not wish to be rushed into premature intervention. While by no means convinced that the electoral law was perfect, he had serious doubts concerning the adoption of universal suffrage in a country where so many of the people were still illiterate. The new education bill introducing compulsory education was not yet even adopted by the Chamber—it only became law a year later. The King, while deplored the economic results which the General Strike was bound to have for the workers as well as for the industrialists, allowed events to follow their course and was this time criticized by the Socialists as he had been criticized three years previously by the Catholics.

Those who had called him a "Socialist King" on account of his warm sympathy with the poor realized their mistake. His distrust in sweeping theories included that of collectivism; class war or class prejudice was repugnant to him in whatever quarter it showed itself. While moving with his time and acknowledging the futility of attempting to check the inevitable development of political institutions, he was by no means prepared to hasten it unduly. He did not believe that most of the evils in national and international affairs would be removed if the people were able to exert their will through universal suffrage, or any other means. In this acceptance of the word he could not even be called a "democrat." One of his biographers comes much closer to the truth when he calls him a "demophile," for if he had a predilection for any class of society it was for the peasants and the labourers who later were to form the

larger proportion of his army,<sup>1</sup> and if he insisted on one social duty more than on any other it was on the responsibility of men of influence and learning towards those who did not enjoy their advantages. He believed in the quality of the individual more than in the quality of the system.

The deadlock between the Government and the Trade Unions soon came to an end. Strike funds were exhausted and the Labour leaders were not anxious to assume responsibility for extreme measures. Parliament, on the other hand, remembering the riots of 1886, was equally eager to find a prompt solution. A compromise was reached through the vote of an order of the day, promising a revision of the Constitution as soon as a "suitable formula" regarding the franchise had been agreed upon.

(6) The linguistic question, though far less important in pre-War than in post-War days, was already disturbing the political atmosphere of Belgium.

Before the extension of the franchise, in 1893, the "flamingant" movement only affected intellectual circles. A group of scholars and writers, reacting against the nineteenth-century tendency to revile the Flemish language as a mere local patois, devoted themselves to the study of Flemish folk-lore, published collections of Flemish folk-songs, and laid the foundations of modern Flemish literature. This purely regionalist and cultural movement had no political character. Most electors in those days belonged to the bourgeoisie which spoke and wrote in French, and was often, even in Flanders, ignorant of the popular language.

As soon, however, as the franchise was extended to the mass of the people, the movement assumed a very different aspect. The Ghent Socialists, in their Flemish paper, *Vooruit* (Forward), denounced French as the language of the moneyed classes. The democratic clergy of Flemish villages were no less outspoken in their attacks upon a literature which, according to them spread scepticism and

<sup>1</sup> Dumont Wilden. *Méert Ter.*

atheism. The Flemings in those days had serious grievances, since they were governed, and sometimes judged, in a language they could not understand. Their claims met with unreasonable opposition, and when they were at last granted, a persecution complex had developed, and the *flamingants*, instead of recognizing bilingualism in Flanders as an historical fact of long standing, wished to oust French from their provinces and realize complete unity of language. Up to the end of the nineteenth century the conflict remained local, and only concerned the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking population of Flanders. Later however, the wish to introduce Flemish into the central administration of the country affected the interests of the southern provinces. During the first years of King Albert's reign, the dispute extended to the whole country, but did not seriously compromise the political situation because the two main parties, Catholic and Socialist, included large numbers of Flemings and Walloons.

The King endeavoured to compose these differences. He worked for co-operation among Flemings and Walloons as among employers and employees. According to his own words, he wished his people to "cultivate the feelings which united them, and not those which divided them." Even as heir to the throne, he had given many tokens of his appreciation of Flemish culture. After his accession, he supported linguistic reforms. He had made it a rule to use Flemish, which he talked fluently, when addressing Flemish audiences, and had been the first Belgian Sovereign to take the oath in both languages.

King Albert was not seriously alarmed by internal difficulties, because he knew that such quarrels among a free people are often a sign of health rather than of weakness. He was, besides, convinced that if danger threatened their independence, the Belgians would soon forget their quarrels to join in common resistance.

In his Accession speech, the King had promised "to devote all his strength, all his life to the service of Belgium."

During the first four years of his reign he did his utmost to improve the country's defences against the threatening danger of invasion, and to convince her neighbours that she could be trusted. He worked unceasingly to appease linguistic and political enmities, and to develop this spirit of patriotic co-operation which was going to play such an important part in safeguarding the nation's independence. Only those who witnessed the change of public opinion during that period can appreciate the results of his wisdom and firmness, and the sympathies which he won in all quarters and among all parties. When he urged military preparations he saw clearly what was needed and the reforms required in the army's organization, but it was almost unconsciously that he helped to develop the spirit of patriotic devotion which was as valuable to the country's security as her Field Army. Doing unobtrusively what he thought right, he won all hearts and so became in the hour of danger the symbol of the people's best qualities and the defender of their ideals.

### CHAPTER THREE

## The Rule of Law (1830-1904)

(1) If international law is to play any part in the destinies of Europe, August the 2nd 1914 will be considered one of the most important dates in history. The German ultimatum challenged the very foundation of organized peace by ignoring the binding character of the treaties concluded by the Powers in 1839. Belgium, in her answer, vindicated the legal principles which would have been flouted if the German attack had succeeded. Her action caused Great Britain to enter the War at a time when such intervention was invaluable, and to carry on the struggle with greater energy than she would have done in other circumstances. The reaction was not so marked in America, who had no direct responsibility in the matter, but the "case of Belgium" prepared her for the step she took when she threw her weight on the side of the Allies after the outbreak of German submarine warfare. In one sense Armageddon was a "Fight for Right," according to the acknowledged formula, and the King of the Belgians stood forth as the champion of law and order against the blind forces of violence and chaos.

It was certainly through no fault of his that this noble vision was, at a later stage, marred by compromises and national ambitions. His record, from beginning to end, is unstained. The efforts made in certain quarters to prove that he had already taken sides several years before the War, have only shown how scrupulously impartial he remained, depriving himself of the advantages he might have derived from preliminary agreements with Great Britain and France.

There is no greater mistake than to minimize the

importance of the Belgian question on the ground that it made excellent propaganda, or that some Statesmen used it as a weapon against their country's enemies. Such reasoning would nullify all public and civil law. In a similar way, the robber might challenge the principle of property because the judge who condemns him belongs to the moneyed classes, and the murderer might question the sacredness of human life because it shelters certain people who are not fit to live. If we hold that international law is merely a figure of speech, and that treaties are only temporary arrangements to be broken by the parties as soon as circumstances permit, Belgium and her King may appear as the innocent dupes of the régime imposed upon them, and their resistance may be looked upon as a piece of wild quixotism. But if we maintain that the signature of a nation is no less honourable than that of a private individual, and that fidelity to treaties is the first condition of civilized international relations, the violation and the defence of Belgian neutrality assume exceptional importance. Nothing which happened before or afterwards can alter their significance.

This significance is not yet properly understood in spite, or perhaps on account, of the enthusiastic comments made at the time. When the news of Liège spread over the world, King Albert was compared with Leonidas and the Belgian Army with his indomitable three hundred warriors. But the Spartans were Greeks, allied with other Greeks against a common foe, while the Belgians were neutrals, who were not concerned with European alliances or ententes as long as their neutrality was respected. Liège was no Thermopylæ and, though the troops which defended it acted as an advance guard and efficiently delayed the enemy's progress, they were placed there through no concerted plans of the allied military leaders.

Even when the meaning of neutrality began to sink into the mind of the public, the utmost confusion prevailed between "natural" and "conventional," "general" and

"permanent" neutrality. It was often believed that "little Belgium" was in the position of a small State ruthlessly invaded and waging a great fight against tremendous odds, thus providing invaluable time to France and Great Britain to muster their forces. No essential distinction was made between her political status and that of Holland or Denmark, for instance. The idea prevailed that she was prompted in her action more by spontaneous feeling than by a sense of duty. When the Belgians endeavoured to explain that they followed the only course open to them, that there was literally nothing else to do, they were met with knowing looks and indulgent smiles which meant either: "That is your modest way of putting it," or "It is always safer to be on the right side of the law."

At the time when the "Scrap of Paper" was plastered all over Great Britain, a large number of people remained ignorant of the obligations implied by this historical document; obligations, on the part of Belgium, to preserve the peace, to observe the strictest impartiality in all international matters and to fulfil her duties as a neutral. These included specifically the duty of opposing the passage of foreign troops through Belgian territory. For three generations these principles had been the basis of Belgian public law. The Belgian people had grown familiar with them. They fully realized the advantages of an arrangement which granted them independence and gave them the protection of powerful neighbours. It was quite clear to them that, owing to the special situation their country occupied on the map, they were living under an exceptional régime and that the peace of Europe depended on its maintenance. When the blow fell, they were appalled and indignant at Germany's action and painfully surprised at being left for so long to fight their lonely fight. But, from the first, the King's decision was taken for granted. Resistance could not be shirked; subservience to the law-breaking Power would have meant treachery to the law-abiding Powers; the contract signed in 1831, and renewed eight years later, implied

a certain risk; the time had come to face it. It was the price to be paid for eighty years of peaceful prosperity.

The King's thoughts were first of his people, and he was solely preoccupied at the time with the urgent measures to be taken for defending the country, but he was too familiar with modern history not to realize the supreme importance of the issue at stake. Belgium was not alone concerned. The treaties which were being challenged had been the first fruits of the Powers' efforts to establish peace on legal undertakings in this exposed corner of Europe. Belgian permanent neutrality had been for long considered as the most successful attempt ever made to substitute legal for military guarantees, and the prestige of international law depended on its preservation. It was the most decisive step taken hitherto by European policy towards a truly international system. The Holy Alliance was based on force and self-interest, as were later the series of alliances and ententes which endeavoured to maintain Europe's unstable balance of power. But the treaties establishing Belgium's neutrality opened a new vista. They were looked upon as the very foundation of peace. If any country had been allowed to violate them and to reap the benefit of this violation, all hope of consolidating the rule of law in the world would have disappeared. To fight for such a cause was truly waging "a war to end war." In spite of the fact that the post-War period brought with it bitter disappointments, it must not be forgotten that the so-called "illusions" which preceded them were only rendered possible through the successful defence of Belgian neutrality.

(2) What were the exact circumstances which induced the Powers to establish this régime? And how was it strengthened throughout the last century, thanks to the policy pursued by the Belgian Kings and to the support of British diplomacy?

When, after the Renaissance, a number of centralized Powers (Spain, Austria, France and later Prussia) con-

tended for hegemony in Europe, the Southern Netherlands, under Spanish and Austrian rule, became their favourite battleground. It was made abundantly clear that the possession of these provinces gave to any party an outstanding advantage over the others. Hence the traditional policy of England, who consistently threw her weight against the invader of the Belgian provinces, and the decision of the Powers allied against Louis XIV to stem the tide of French invasions by the erection, in southern Belgium, of a barrier of fortified towns.

When, in September 1701, on the eve of the War of Spanish Succession, England, Holland and Austria concluded a fresh treaty of alliance, they decided to reconquer "the provinces of the Spanish Netherlands, so that they should serve as a dyke, rampart and barrier in order to separate and isolate France from the United Provinces." At the end of hostilities, the victorious Allies carried this policy into effect. The Emperor agreed, in 1715, to the permanent occupation of a number of fortresses by Austrian and Dutch troops, the cost of such occupation being defrayed by the Belgian people.

During the peaceful period which followed, the occupation of the barrier towns became perfunctory, and Joseph II succeeded in dismantling a certain number of them without arousing any strong protest. But when, in 1792, history repeated itself, and Republican and Imperial France succeeded in conquering the Netherlands and maintaining them under her sway for over twenty years, the Holy Alliance decided to rebuild and consolidate the old protective bulwark. A new line of fortifications was carefully chosen by Wellington, and this time Belgium was united with Holland to form with her the new Kingdom of the Netherlands, under the sovereignty of the Prince of Orange. The diplomats of 1815 were confident that the new State would be strong enough to prevent French aggression.

All their calculations were based on force. The possession of Belgium was the condition of hegemony in

Europe; France had repeatedly benefited from the military weakness of the Belgian provinces; therefore all necessary measures must be taken to strengthen that key position. The wall erected in the eighteenth century had been destroyed; another stronger and higher wall must be built in its stead. The whole system of the Congress of Vienna concerning the Southern Netherlands ignored legal guarantees, just as it ignored the popular right of self-determination. The Belgians were placed under the sovereignty of William I of Orange, without being consulted, because such a union suited the Powers' plan of keeping France henceforth within her political limits.

The Belgian Revolution of September 1830 upset these arrangements. The Belgian people took the law into their own hands, successfully repulsed the Dutch forces sent against them, gave themselves a provisional government, elected a popular Congress and, through this Congress, proclaimed, as early as November 18th, their complete independence under a constitutional monarchy, from which the house of Orange-Nassau should be perpetually excluded. Under the policy pursued hitherto, the Powers who had created the Kingdom of the Netherlands, fifteen years earlier, should obviously have helped the Dutch King to suppress the insurrection and to restore the barrier they had taken such pains to erect after Waterloo. Soon, however, after the meeting of the London Conference in November, circumstances became particularly propitious to Belgium. The Polish Revolution paralysed the conservative Powers for the time being; the change of government which brought Lord Grey to the Premiership and Lord Palmerston to the Foreign Office on November 15th, prompted England to pursue a more liberal policy. These circumstances only became decisive because popular opinion in Europe made itself heard.<sup>1</sup> Between 1815 and 1830, idealism had again asserted itself, and moral engagements had acquired a new strength in international affairs. It became, therefore,

<sup>1</sup> W. V. Temperley in *Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy*, II, 114-115.

possible to substitute a legal wall for the material wall of the barrier. This new rampart was designed to protect Belgium, not only against French attacks, but against the aggression of any other nation. It surrounded her on every side. Neutrality conferred upon her the guarantee of security, in exchange for a promise of non-interference in foreign affairs.

(3) The idealistic aspect of this conception, and its kinship with modern ideas, is made still more evident when we realize that such an arrangement implied on the part of its initiators some foresight and disinterestedness. Separation from Holland did not necessarily mean independence; it might just as well have meant partition. It re-opened the whole question of Belgian unity and let loose the old international jealousies and ambitions. The tone of the preamble to the Protocol of January 20th, 1851, drawn up by the Conference, reveals a notable change in international psychology:

*The Plenipotentiaries . . . are unanimously of opinion that the Five Powers owe it to their real interests, to their common friendship, to the tranquillity of Europe, and to the fulfilment of the views laid down in their Protocol of December 20th (the recognition of Belgium's future independence) to issue a solemn testimony, an undeniable proof of their firm resolve to seek no increase of territory, no exclusive influence, no single advantage from the arrangements regarding Belgium, or from any circumstances that may supervene, and to afford to that country itself, and to all the States surrounding it, the best guarantees of tranquillity and safety.*

Then follow the two articles of the proposed treaty concerning Belgian neutrality: Article V stating that the country will be a "perpetually neutral State" and that the Five Powers "guarantee this perpetual neutrality and the integrity and inviolability of Belgian territory"; and

Article VI declaring that, “by a just reciprocity, Belgium will be bound to observe this neutrality towards all other States, and in every way to respect their internal and external tranquillity.”

The intention of the Powers was made clearer still by the Protocol of January 27th, in which they declared that, without prejudice to Belgian sovereignty, they assumed the right to lay down the fundamental principle of the country’s position among European nations:

*Anxious to maintain the general peace, convinced that their agreement was its sole guarantee, and acting with complete disinterestedness concerning the affairs of Belgium, the Five Powers were aiming only at . . . giving her an existence which should secure, at the same time, her own happiness and the security of the other States.*

In the words of Emil Ludwig, the projected arrangement was “a pattern of modern harmony, firstly as a voluntary declaration on oath of the inviolability of a coveted maiden, secondly as a model for the United States of Europe, which means nothing more than an extension of the principle of neutralized States.”<sup>1</sup>

It may be objected that the principle of neutralization was not new and that it had already been applied in 1815 to the Helvetic Confederation. But the case of Switzerland was very different. Instead of being open to foreign armies, like Belgium, Switzerland was a natural fortress; instead of occupying a key position which gave to its possessor hegemony on the Continent, she lay off the beaten track of European armies and away from the sea. Assuming that the Swiss régime adopted in 1815 was as liberal as that given to Belgium in 1831—which may be questioned—the very fact of applying this régime to the cockpit of Europe marks a definite progress, and reveals the intention on the part of the Powers of preserving peace not only by a neat balance of military power, but by precise

<sup>1</sup> *July 1914*, p. 163.

legal obligations binding them to respect the very territory for the possession of which they were most likely to fight.

It may also be pointed out that, apart from Palmerston, few delegates realized the importance of the new formula. To Matuszewic, the Russian delegate, it appeared as "the means of preserving Belgium from France, and Holland from Belgium." For Talleyrand, the French representative, "recognized neutrality" was a system which, "while satisfying no one, would perhaps succeed better than the others." A close study of the negotiations pursued in London during these months leaves the impression that the majority of the delegates were driven towards neutrality because all the other issues were closed. A ruthless suppression of the democratic revolution favoured by the conservative Powers would have brought trouble with Louis Philippe and no doubt also with Liberal England. Partition, Talleyrand's "favourite plan," might have suited Prussia and France, but was strongly opposed by Palmerston. Besides, it would have wrecked the system of Vienna which aimed at restraining French ambitions. The main disadvantage of the Belgian revolution was that, by separating the southern provinces from Holland, it weakened the barrier and increased the temptation which France or Germany might feel of seizing once more the strategic cross-roads. Was it possible to buttress the position through a solemn treaty of non-aggression? This solution was finally adopted not only for its intrinsic value, but also because it was the only one which excluded the probability of a conflict for which no Power was prepared at the time.

Once adopted, the formula was given the finest robes which the flowery language of the time could provide. But these expressions of pacific intentions and disinterestedness are not a mere disguise; they have a very definite meaning. They show the trend of public opinion in 1830, a public opinion which even the conservative Powers could no longer ignore. Popular idealism already exerted a subtle influence on the mind of the most experienced Statesmen of

the time. They spoke of guaranteed neutrality as a dream, “a fine dream,” according to Baron von Wessenberg. “God grant that it be realized.” It lasted eighty-three years.

(4) The first years of neutrality seemed to justify the scepticism of the diplomats and the misgivings of the patriots. It needed all the wisdom of Leopold I, all the skill of his minister, Lebeau, all the energy of Palmerston, to convert a weak and ill-defined guarantee into the strong safeguard it became after 1840.

No sooner had the new King of the Belgians ascended the throne on July 21st 1831, than the Dutch launched a surprise attack which was so successful that the Belgian Government had to appeal to the Guaranteeing Powers for military help. Its prestige suffered in consequence and a new Treaty of “Twenty-four Articles” was drafted, on October the 14th, which was declared by the Conference to be “final and irrevocable.” The fortress of Antwerp, still held by the Dutch, was to be evacuated, and Belgium lost half of Luxemburg and half of Limburg. The Dutch King having refused to recall his troops, Antwerp was besieged by Anglo-French forces in November. The fortress capitulated in the following month, and the French evacuated Belgian territory. The Dutch, however, remained in possession of two outlying forts, and, as King William refused their evacuation, the treaty could not be completely executed. According to a provisory convention signed in May 1833, the two forts remained in Dutch hands, the Scheldt was opened to trade, and the Belgians were left in occupation of those parts of Luxemburg and Limburg which had been ceded to Holland by the Treaty of the Twenty-four Articles.

This situation was maintained for the next five years, King William vainly anticipating that the Orangist Party in Belgium would finally succeed in bringing public opinion round to his side, and the Belgians nursing the fond hope that the territorial situation would not be altered and that

Luxemburg and Limburg—which had collaborated in the revolution and sent their delegates to the Congress and to the Chambers—would remain an integral part of the country. When, in March 1838, King William finally declared his willingness to sign the Twenty-four Articles, the Belgians protested violently against this belated execution of the Treaty. The Conference, however, remained adamant and even threatened military intervention should Belgium prolong her resistance. The Government succeeded, in March 1839, in obtaining the Chamber's consent by a narrow majority, and three treaties were finally signed in London on April 19th 1839. The first refers to Belgo-Dutch relations; the second concerns Holland and the Powers; the latter concerns Belgium and the Powers and deals with the question of guaranteed neutrality. This is the famous "scrap of paper." Article VII declares that Belgium, within the territorial limits of the Treaty, "will form an independent and perpetually neutral State," and that "it will be bound to observe the same neutrality towards all the other States." Article XXV adds that "the Courts of Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia guarantee to His Majesty the King of the Belgians the execution of all the articles that precede."

Belgium was faced with a series of difficulties during this first period of Leopold's reign. There were long and humiliating discussions, lasting from April 1831 to January 1832, concerning the dismantling of certain fortresses of the Barrier, during which the King was denied the right to enter into direct negotiations with France; the Treaty of Twenty-four Articles was not ratified by Prussia, Austria and Russia until the spring of 1842, and it was only sixteen years later that the Tsar thought fit to send a representative to Brussels. When, in 1835, Belgium decided to erect fortified works around Diest to protect her north-eastern frontier, Prussian resistance encouraged by Metternich was only overcome thanks to British support. Other incidents occurred which showed that certain Powers intended to ma-

neutrality as a means to an end and to interpret the treaties according to their own interests.

All through these years Palmerston's sympathy and advice proved invaluable, and it is doubtful whether the system which he had created would have survived this period of trial if he had not persistently opposed the prevailing tendency to subject Belgium to foreign control.

(5) It has been the fate of the Kings of the Belgians to play a prominent part in history. King Albert is remembered as the hero of 1914, Leopold II as the founder of the Congo, and Leopold I as the most remarkable representative of constitutional monarchy on the Continent. He and his faithful adviser, Baron von Stockmar, were among the first to realize fully the change which the monarchical principle had undergone after the French Revolution, and the way in which a modern King's influence might exert itself within the frame of parliamentary institutions. The old conceptions of absolutism, based upon the divine right of kings, should once for all be abandoned, but the Monarch should nevertheless retain a great prestige by placing himself above factions and parties. By adopting a strictly impartial attitude in internal politics, he would represent those interests which all citizens have in common, and his voice would be heard in their defence. In times of crisis he would be entitled to intervene in order to safeguard the nation against strife and preserve its unity ; but it was mainly in international affairs that the modern king would find a wide scope for his activity. As the acknowledged representative of the whole nation he would be in a better position than any statesman to direct its destinies, foresee the dangers which might threaten its existence or independence, and urge all military and diplomatic measures which the situation required. He would stand as a symbol in the eyes of all, and would be honoured not so much for his power as for his disinterestedness.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. de Lichtervelde: *Leopold of the Belgians*.

The ideas of the first King of the Belgians were shared by his nephew and disciple Prince Albert, who was a few years later to become Prince Consort. They certainly influenced Queen Victoria during the first part of her reign, and contributed to increase the popularity of the British Crown. A link can thus be established between the principles which determined the character of the two most successful modern dynasties. But, while in England the monarchy developed on traditional lines, in Belgium it had to adapt itself to an entirely new Constitution, framed on the morrow of a popular revolution, in which the prerogatives of the Executive were strictly and jealously subordinated to those of the Legislative Power. While England pursued an independent policy and enjoyed at the time an unquestionable supremacy in the councils of Europe, Belgium was a small State deprived of all initiative through an ill-defined neutral régime.

The genuine reluctance with which Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg accepted the Crown is easily understood. He was confronted with a formidable task. On the one hand, the Constitution left him little scope for action; on the other, the Powers were inclined to paralyse his initiative. He was placed between the hammer of foreign ambitions and the anvil of Belgian institutions. He soon discovered, however, that the very danger to which the country was exposed, increased his prestige among his people. When they realized that their new King stood between them and a hostile Europe, the Belgians, forgetting their quarrels, rallied around him and never questioned his right to direct the country's foreign policy and to make his voice heard in her defence.

Relying on this patriotic union and on the help of able Statesmen, such as Lebeau, Leopold I succeeded in strengthening the frail system of neutrality and in obtaining from the Powers full recognition of Belgian independence. He understood that the régime could only succeed if, in exchange for complete impartiality in foreign affairs, the

nation remained free to live her own life according to her own Constitution. He realized that if Belgium were to retain her freedom she must pin her faith to the solemn pledge which she had given not to interfere with her neighbours, and to the equally solemn pledge given by the Powers not to interfere with her, and to see that no other State succeeded in doing so. A weak and suspected neutrality was a constant source of danger, but a strong and respected neutrality founded on British friendship, might become Belgium's most efficient safeguard. The King took the reluctant Powers at their word. With remarkable shrewdness he used every occasion to convince them of the advantage they might derive from the new arrangement, if faithfully observed by all parties.

Belgium might easily have erred through weakness or through self-assertion. She might have given way to the demands made upon her or to the criticisms directed against her, from all quarters, thus satisfying no one by vainly endeavouring to satisfy everyone. She might also have infringed the restrictions imposed upon her sovereignty and by leaning towards one or the other of her powerful neighbours, irremediably compromised the independence she had so dearly bought. It was perhaps the greatest service rendered by Leopold I to his new subjects, that he so consistently and firmly pursued a middle course.

(6) The Eastern crisis of 1840 which once again set the interests of France against those of the Powers, including England, afforded the King an opportunity of asserting Belgian rights under the 1839 treaties. When, on August the 4th, the clouds of war began to gather, Lebeau, whom he had recalled to the Foreign Office, issued a dispatch to Belgian diplomatic agents abroad, stating that the country in all circumstances would abide by the treaties, and would maintain scrupulous neutrality; in case of need she would take all measures necessary for her security. The first part of this dispatch caused satis-

faction in Berlin and Vienna, but Prussia and Austria persisted in interpreting any Belgian armament as favouring France, and therefore constituting a breach of neutrality. Lebeau answered that external neutrality did not exclude internal sovereignty, and that the treaties gave Belgium the right to take whatever measures she thought fit in order to defend herself. All through the crisis, the King maintained the same detached attitude, in spite of Thiers' reproaches and the advice given him by Frederick-William and Queen Victoria to solicit admission to the German Confederation. This impartiality allowed him to make full use of his family relationships in his efforts to maintain peace between London and Paris.<sup>1</sup>

At last, in October, the threat of war was removed, and on November 10th, in his speech from the throne, Leopold I was able to declare that the recent friction between the great European Powers had led him to appreciate more fully the good relationship which he had maintained with them. "The position of Belgium," he added, "has been determined by the treaties, and perpetual neutrality has been solemnly promised to her. My Government has neglected no opportunity of showing the importance they attach to this guarantee. Everywhere—I say it with satisfaction—we have only met friendly feelings, inspired by respect for the principle which is the basis of our public law. We cannot sufficiently persuade ourselves that neutrality is the true foundation of our policy; our constant aim must be to maintain it sincere, loyal and strong."

This solemn declaration made a deep impression. Both Chamber and Senate, in their addresses to the Sovereign, endorsed his interpretation of Belgium's political status. The Chamber emphasized the guarantees conferred by neutrality, which was "for Belgium a token of independence and one of the conditions of the balance of power in Europe." The Senate added that Belgium "had been too long both the battlefield and the victim of foreign nations,

<sup>1</sup> Banning: *Les Origines et les Phases de la Neutralité belge*.

not to appreciate the advantages of a neutrality which was the true basis of her policy.” The Press showed a similar understanding of the situation. “The King could not speak otherwise,” declared *L’Observateur*, “but it is nevertheless significant that he spoke as he did.” It is significant because, “until now, neither foreign peoples nor the Belgian nation, nor perhaps her own Government, had sufficiently taken to heart the guarantees and obligations of neutrality. . . . Thanks to the speech from the throne, there is no longer any possible doubt as to Belgium’s intentions.”

From this point of view the year 1840 is of capital importance. The European crisis had given the Belgian Government and the Belgian people the opportunity of clearing the atmosphere by asserting their resolution to abide by the treaties in the letter and in the spirit. The confusion which had prevailed abroad, between the Conservative and Liberal views, the conceptions of “neutrality-barrier” and “independent neutrality,” was to a great extent dispelled. In the words of Henri Pirenne, Leopold I had shown “that Belgium was neither a satellite of France, nor a bridge-head against France, and that she interpreted her neutrality as a safeguard of her independence and of general peace.”

The next crisis and the next test, which perhaps impressed Europe more than any other, was the popular upheaval which broke out in Paris in February 1848.

It will be remembered that the insurrection which brought about the independence of the Belgian people in September 1830, had closely followed the French Revolution of July. Trouble had long been brewing in Belgium owing to the unyielding attitude of the Dutch King, and would have taken place in any circumstances, but the Paris revolt undoubtedly hastened the event. It remained to be seen whether a similar effect would be produced by a similar cause eighteen years later. If, as had been contended at the time, French influences had played a decisive part in the attitude of the Belgians in 1830, Brussels would once

more feel the repercussion of the blow struck in Paris. The majority of the European Powers expected no less, knowing that an important section of the French revolutionary party were bent on carrying their propaganda through Europe at the point of the sword.

On February the 25th, the French leader Victor Considerant had written to Rogier, the Belgian Prime Minister, warning him against the use of force, and telling him that the next day there would be two hundred thousand men in the streets of Brussels, hailing the Republic. The Belgian Government, however, never doubted that the loyalty of the people would remain unshaken. Events confirmed this belief. In the Belgian Chamber, a deputy, having passionately declared that the ideals of the French Revolution would spread all round the world, drew upon himself the following repartee: "To go round the world, Liberty has now no need to pass through Belgium." While the revolutionary movement was sweeping over Europe and shaking the monarchical systems of Germany and Austria, Brussels remained as calm as if the political atmosphere had never been disturbed.

The situation was nevertheless threatening. The poet Lamartine, now at the head of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gratified by the Belgians' early recognition of his Government, had formally promised to oppose any kind of armed propaganda, but was either unwilling or unable to counteract the activity of some of his colleagues. As soon as it was realized that Brussels would not follow the lead of Paris, the French Press launched bitter attacks against Belgium, and tried to interpret the precautionary measures taken by the latter as a mark of hostility to France. These attempts at intimidation failed completely, and two bands of revolutionists who crossed the frontier on March 25th and 29th were easily disarmed by Belgian soldiers.

A paradoxical situation now arose. Belgium, scorned by the Conservative Powers in 1830 as a hotbed of revolution, was looked upon suddenly as a model of social steadiness.

Metternich who had never been reconciled to the existence of the new kingdom, and who refused to believe that it could retain its independence, had an opportunity of realizing his mistake *de visu* when, compelled to fly from Vienna, he sought refuge in Brussels. In every country those who had deplored the 1839 settlement and scorned Palmerston's far-sighted policy, were the first to express their appreciation. M. Van der Weyer, then Belgian Minister in London, wrote, on April 5th, that Belgian nationality was no longer considered "an artificial thing, resting merely on diplomatic conventions, but a reality based upon the unshakeable will of a nation which understands its duties to itself and to others, and puts them into practice. . . ." The same approval was expressed in Prussia, where the Belgian Constitution was considered as a model. Even Russia joined in this concert of praise, and her Minister Nesselrode declared that: "in the midst of a crisis which had threatened social order, Belgium had proved worthy of the admiration of Europe."

William II of Holland, realizing at last that all attempts at restoration would be vain and that the new state of things had justified itself, adopted henceforth a friendly policy, and Orangism as such ceased to exist.

King Leopold could not disguise his personal satisfaction. "It is rather strange," he wrote to Queen Victoria on March 25th, "that I who desire to retire from politics, should be the only Sovereign on the continent to weather the storm, and that at a ten hours' journey from Paris." To which the Queen replied: "You are held up as a model to other Sovereigns, and the Belgians as models to the German peoples."

(7) The *Coup d'Etat* of December 1851, followed the next year by the accession of Napoleon III to the Imperial throne, caused a certain alarm in Brussels. The first threat, however, did not come from the South, but from the East. After the outbreak of hostilities between France

and Austria in 1859, Prussia mobilized an army of 300,000 men, and Marshal Moltke prepared a plan for the invasion of Belgium similar to that which his nephew executed in 1914. It appears, from the diplomatic correspondence of the time, that it was confidently believed in Germany that Belgium would not oppose the passage of Prussian troops through her territory. Once more the Belgian Cabinet found support in London. Writing on July 2nd, Van de Weyer expressed his satisfaction: “The least act of hostility against Belgium would be considered here as a *casus belli*. . . . As a British Statesman, now in the Ministry once said, the frontiers of England begin on the Scheldt.”<sup>1</sup>

These apprehensions, fortunately, never materialized, but the Belgian deputies, now alive to the urgent need of improving the country’s defence, promptly voted the necessary credits for the fortifications of Antwerp, according to General Brialmont’s plan. Strangely enough, this decision was greeted with violent protests by the French Press. Leopold I was called the “temporary sovereign of an artificial country, of a counterfeit nation,” and it was suggested that the offensive lion on the Waterloo monument should be replaced by the Imperial eagle.

The fact is that, owing to the growing ambitions of her powerful neighbours, Belgium was in danger of becoming once more a pawn on the European chessboard. A conflict threatened between Prussia and Austria, and it was rumoured that Bismarck was ready to allow Napoleon to annex Belgium in order to secure his alliance or his benevolent neutrality. When King Leopold I died, on December 10th, 1865, the outlook appeared so dark that *The Times* expressed a doubt as to whether the country would survive her King. The pessimists forgot that the days of a weak and ill-defined neutrality were over. Leopold had not only succeeded in strengthening the country’s international position, he had created a tradition defining her duties and her rights, and these had been repeatedly

<sup>1</sup> De Ridder in *Histoire de la Belgique Contemporaine*, vol. I.

recognized by the Conservative as well as by the Liberal Powers. To use the King's words in a letter to Queen Victoria, written nine years before his death: "Belgium has bound herself to remain neutral, and her existence is based upon this neutrality, which the other Powers have guaranteed and are bound to maintain if she keeps her engagements." Any breach of neutrality on her part would upset the balance of power upon which European peace depended. Her existence did not prevent all conflicts, but it prevented at least a general conflagration. As long as Belgium kept out of the struggle, England could retain her detached attitude and exert her moderating influence. It had been contended, in 1851, that neutrality was a flimsy dream; Leopold I had shown that it was a solid reality, and that it could be maintained with sincerity, loyalty and strength. All the ambitions and intrigues of the following years failed to destroy the diplomatic stronghold he had so patiently and wisely erected.

The crisis began after Sadowa. Napoleon III, who had been taken unawares by the rapid success of the Prussian arms, endeavoured to seek compensations for France in exchange for Prussian aggrandisements. A series of dilatory negotiations took place, the outcome of which was the draft of the famous secret treaty called after the French Minister, Benedetti, and only revealed to the world in July 1870. This treaty would have secured Prussian help for France when she wished to conquer Belgium.

Bismarck did not delay his consent on account of his respect for Belgian neutrality, but because he did not wish to alienate English sympathies. Writing to Count Bernsdorf, the Prussian Minister in London, in January 1867, he declared that "the importance which Belgium" had for him "derived principally and precisely from that which it had in the eyes of Great Britain. . . . He had no motive for considering the maintenance of Belgian integrity as one of the necessary factors of his own policy, or for consenting alone to any sacrifice for its safeguard, if the latter were to

threaten Germany's own integrity in a struggle with the most powerful of her neighbours. . . . He was not inclined to make the existence of Belgium a primary question if, by giving way on this point, he could secure the good relations with France which were indispensable to Germany." Bismarck was of course aware of the inquiries made by Lord Stanley in Paris, during the previous year, regarding the Franco-Prussian negotiations, and of the reassuring answer he had received.

Unwilling to challenge English policy with regard to Belgium, the French Emperor hoped at least to secure the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg which the Dutch King was not unwilling to cede against financial compensations. Though Bismarck did not openly oppose the project, he declared that the matter lay with the signatories of the Treaties of 1839, which, in determining the status of Belgium, had at the same time determined that of the Grand Duchy. It was therefore found necessary to convene a Conference of the Powers in London, on May 7th 1867, and Belgium and Holland were invited to attend. Prussia agreed to the dismantling of the fortress of Luxemburg, and the Grand Duchy was declared a neutral independent State under the "collective guarantee" of the Powers.

Conversations took place at the time between the British and Belgian Governments, with regard to the nature of the guarantee given to Belgium in 1839, and of the one granted to the Grand Duchy by the recent treaty. Both Lord Stanley and Lord Derby declared that the two guarantees were entirely different; the first was binding separately upon each of the Powers, and a violation constituted a *casus belli* for each of them, while the second implied merely a collective undertaking based upon a common agreement.

Napoleon III could not rest content with the evacuation by the Prussian troops of the fortress of Luxemburg; Knowing that if he approached the Belgian Government his plans would again be defeated, he entered into negotiations through the *Compagnie de l'Est Français* with

two private railway companies for the purchase of all their lines through Belgian territory. As soon as they heard that, in spite of their opposition, an agreement had been signed in Paris in January 1869, the Belgian Government introduced a Bill forbidding all railway companies to sell their property and concessions without proper authorization. This measure provoked an outburst on the part of the French Press which merely reflected the Emperor's dangerous temper. Writing to his Minister of War, he suggested that the latter ought to act as if war were to be the issue of the conflict: "If, in the present case, war broke out with Belgium, Germany would have no right to interfere, and if she interfered she would be the aggressor. . . . Besides, Belgium opens to us the doors of Germany. We can debouch on the Lower Rhine wherever it suits us . . . and if we miss this occasion, when shall we find another?"

The Belgian Minister, Frère-Orban, went to Paris to confer with the Emperor, who broached the subject of a political union. Frère-Orban, standing on the firm ground of independent neutrality, and strongly supported by British diplomacy, succeeded in maintaining the Belgian standpoint. He finally obtained the signature of a Protocol which, while sparing Napoleon's susceptibilities, completely defeated his purpose.

(8) Such was the situation on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War. Belgian neutrality had gone from strength to strength for nearly forty years. It had been tested in fair weather and foul. Its scope was well defined: independence at home, non-intervention abroad. There was no room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation with regard to the duties imposed by the original treaties and the binding character of the guarantee. Great Britain and Belgium were to reap the fruits of the work so patiently pursued by Palmerston and Leopold I.

After Austria's defeat in 1866, a direct conflict between France and Prussia had become unavoidable. Napoleon

was driven to it by internal difficulties and his failure to restore his prestige through diplomatic success. Bismarck was well prepared for the struggle and even anxious that it should break out at the earliest opportunity. The candidature of the Prince of Hohenzollern to the throne of Spain offered a useful pretext; in July 1870, everybody realized that war was imminent.

The Emperor wrote to Leopold II assuring him of his intention to respect the Belgian status and on July 16th, de Grammont, his Foreign Minister, confirmed this declaration to Baron Beyens, Belgian Minister in Paris: "The Emperor's Government," he wrote, "is resolved to respect the neutrality of Belgian territory on condition that it shall be respected by Prussia and her Allies." Three days later the Belgian Government received the same assurances through the German Minister in Brussels. In response to a request of M. Nothomb, Belgian Minister in Berlin, Bismarck confirmed this statement in a letter dated July 22nd, repeating almost word for word the French declaration. In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, the Belgian Government instructed their representatives in Berlin and Paris to point out that the violation of Belgian territory by one of the belligerents would not release the other from its international obligations. On both sides the answer was perfectly explicit: France and Prussia would only enter Belgium in case of violation of neutrality, in order to help the Belgian troops to repulse the invader. "Belgian neutrality," declared de Grammont, "was created not only for the security and happiness of Belgium, but for our own (France's) security; it is a rampart which you (Belgians) must defend. If you could not do so, we should be obliged to join you in defending it."

During these critical days, the Cabinets in London and Brussels remained in close touch, and English and Belgian diplomats acted in co-operation with one another, in Paris and Berlin.

The publication, on July 25th, of the famous secret

treaty offered by Benedetti to Bismarck, four years before, prompted Disraeli to insist on an unequivocal declaration from the British Government concerning the Belgian guaranteee, and Lord John Russell to urge that England was in duty bound to defend Belgium in case of aggression. Both Gladstone and Lord Granville were obliged to observe a certain reticence, since the negotiations between London, Paris and Berlin were not yet concluded. After the exchange of signatures, on the 9th and 11th of August, the Prime Minister was more explicit. Justifying his diplomatic intervention, he declared that "the day that witnessed Belgium's absorption would hear the death-knell of public right and public law," and that England could not be a passive witness of the worst crime "that ever stained the pages of history."

The stipulations of the new treaties, which were communicated to the Belgian Government as soon as the assent of the parties had been obtained, confirmed the assurances given by France and Prussia on July 16th and 22nd, and added that the Power defending Belgian neutrality would obtain the naval and military support of Great Britain. It was also made clear that the treaties of 1839 were not suspended by the new agreements, and would again come into force after the hostilities.

Belgium meanwhile had taken all necessary defensive measures. On July 15th, the army had been placed on a war footing, all railway lines had been guarded, and both the southern and eastern frontiers were constantly patrolled. In his speech to the Chamber on August 24th, the Prime Minister, Baron d'Anethan, said that before receiving the declarations from France and Prussia promising to respect her neutrality, Belgium had been asked whether she was able to defend it. Having answered in the affirmative, she was in duty bound to prevent any infringement of international obligations. This duty extended not only to the two belligerents, but also to all the guaranteeing Powers: "How could we ask them, in case of need, to execute their

guarantee," said the Belgian Minister, "if we omitted to defend ourselves?"

The Belgian defences seemed adequate, at least on paper. Considering the size of the German and French armies engaged in the field, the addition of 100,000 men on one side or the other was of considerable importance, and both belligerents seemed convinced that the strategical advantages they might gain by the invasion of Belgian territory would not compensate for this addition to the forces of the enemy, even if the recent treaties had not removed all possible doubt concerning England's attitude.

The crisis of 1870 is a perfect example of the working of the guarantee included in the 1839 treaties. Belgium was willing and, to all appearances, able to check an aggression. The two belligerents entered into identical engagements not to violate Belgian territory and to oppose, as guarantors of its neutrality, any such invasion on the part of the other. England, as a third guarantor in Western Europe, had not only promised her help to the Belgian Government, but had bound herself to military intervention against the law-breaker. The most optimistic supporter of neutrality could scarcely have hoped to improve upon this situation. Belgian security had a threefold protection: the military defences of the country, the promise of both belligerents, and the British guarantee.

One month later, Belgium had passed unscathed through the severest conflict which had afflicted Europe since Waterloo, and her neutrality had proved a more efficient safeguard than the strongest "barrier." It was a triumph for the rule of law against the rule of force.

(9) A closer examination of the difficulties which confronted Leopold II during this period shows, however, that if circumstances had not been favourable, the result might have been very different.

On the day of his Accession, in December 1865, the King showed that he fully realized the danger of the forth-

coming struggle between Prussia and Austria: "To my mind," he declared, "the future of Belgium has always been bound up with my own, and I look upon it with that confidence inspired by the right of a courageous, honest and free nation which desires its independence . . . and which will know how to preserve it."

All through the following year, at the time of the secret negotiations conducted by the French minister Rouher with Bismarck, through Benedetti, the King urged his Government to take further military precautions. After visiting Paris and Berlin in June 1867, he addressed to Rogier, his Prime Minister, a memorandum demanding a prompt decision: "If I do not succeed, at the beginning of my reign, in instilling into the minds of my ministers my own conviction of the necessity, of the urgency of strongly reorganizing our army, I shall have to reproach myself all my life for having failed in my duty towards my country." A new military law was finally passed in 1869, but the results were disappointing since, instead of 95,000 men, the call to the colours in July 1870 only yielded 83,000. "I defy anybody," wrote the King a few months later, "to find an officer who will deny that if the army, instead of limiting itself to sentry duty, had been compelled to act, it would have been exposed to the gravest dangers and the most frightful humiliations."<sup>1</sup>

This sweeping judgment was prompted by the anxiety felt by Leopold II concerning the influence of internal politics on Belgian defences. The patriotic union, which had prevailed as long as the existence of the country had been in jeopardy, had definitely broken up and political strife between Liberals and Catholics, Progressives and Conservatives, was embittered by the religious question. On the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, the Liberals, who had held power since 1857, suffered a defeat in the Chamber and the King was faced with a government crisis. Among the Catholic leaders were a few politicians who had led a

<sup>1</sup> P. Daye: *Leopold II.*

campaign against military expenditure, more particularly with regard to the Antwerp fortifications. While calling upon Baron d'Anethan to form a Catholic Ministry, Leopold II made it clear that the defences of the country could on no account be weakened. In spite of his insistence, some ministers maintained their opposition and, in December 1871, the King, stressing his constitutional power, took occasion of certain riots which had occurred in Brussels, in consequence of a financial scandal, to alter the composition of the Government. The fall of the d'Anethan Cabinet is the first striking example of the friction which occurred, until the end of the reign, between Leopold II, who realized the dangers to which the country was exposed, and some of his ministers who, through an exaggerated optimism or for purely electoral reasons, refused to make the necessary sacrifices to maintain an efficient army. The most urgent reform, but also the most unpopular among the privileged electorate of those days, was the suppression of the method of *remplacement*, through which well-to-do parents could provide substitutes who served in the army instead of their sons. This reform was only achieved thirty-eight years later when the old King had the supreme satisfaction of signing, on his death-bed, the new military law introducing personal service.

To internal dissension and inadequate defence was added a third difficulty during the years which preceded the Franco-Prussian War. Great Britain, Belgium's sponsor and principal guarantor, had become unwilling to bind herself to interfere in case of aggression. Van de Weyer, the Belgian Minister in London, found Lord Stanley very sympathetic, but far less definite in his declarations than Palmerston.<sup>1</sup> The latter had on several occasions assured Belgium of British support; Lord Stanley was non-committal. "We shall see," he replied to the Belgian Minister during the critical days of 1867, "and I add: put yourself promptly in a state of defence." This attitude was no doubt

<sup>1</sup> Wullus Rudiger in *Le Flambeau*, March 1955.

inspired by the desire to see the Belgians make the necessary preparations and not to rely too much on British protection, but it was also based on a new conception of the guarantee, which found expression in the course of the parliamentary debates during the crisis of 1870. While some speakers—Lord John Russell amongst them—contended that the British duty of intervention was unconditional, Gladstone considered that view to be “rigid” and impracticable. On August 10th, he explained that he could not agree with those who held “that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding on every party to it, irrespectively altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time, when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises.”<sup>1</sup> This contention was perfectly reasonable for circumstances might arise, such as the refusal of Belgium to defend herself, or a struggle in which all British forces would be engaged, which might render intervention inadvisable or impossible. But the fact that this interpretation of the guarantee had become the British official doctrine weakened its prestige abroad and left the door open to doubt and suspicion.

(10) Instead of establishing Belgian neutrality on unshakeable foundations, the Franco-Prussian War released a number of disintegrating forces which slowly but surely undermined its influence.

The balance of power, which had already been disturbed by Austria's collapse, was further shaken by the unification of the German Reich. Bismarck's attitude during the *Kultur Kampf*, when the German Catholics received some moral support in Belgium, shows a considerable change compared with that of former years. Like Napoleon III, he considered any criticism a breach of neutrality, and declared to Count Schouvalow that, if he did not receive full satisfaction from Belgium, he would unhesitatingly withdraw the guarantee given in 1839.

<sup>1</sup> Headlam-Morley: *Studies in Diplomatic History*, p. 119.

England, on her side, was more and more drawn towards Germany, while her relations with Russia and France were strained by difficulties in Asia and Africa. When therefore, in February 1887, a new Franco-German war was threatening, her attitude with regard to the Belgian guarantee was far less decisive than before. The question of granting to Bismarck a "right of way" through Belgium was seriously discussed in responsible quarters, and Lord Salisbury's correspondence reveals that he was too much in sympathy with Germany to be able to play the impartial part which the circumstances required.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to the dramatic death of General Boulanger, the threat of war never materialized, but the warning enabled Leopold II to secure the construction of the forts on the Meuse, thus completing the Belgian system of defences hitherto based on Antwerp alone. While some British writers were discussing the possibility of a turning movement of German troops through Belgium, Germany appears to have foreseen a similar movement on the part of the French armies. A press campaign emphasized the necessity of constructing new forts closing the road of the Meuse, and the German Minister in Brussels called on the King and on his Prime Minister, pressing this demand to the point of rudeness. These wishes coincided with the Sovereign's own desires and, in June 1887, he succeeded in obtaining from Parliament the necessary credits for the building of two groups of forts: the one around Liège, facing Germany, the other around Namur, facing France.<sup>2</sup>

This decision seems to have caused general satisfaction. Bismarck instructed the German Minister in Brussels to express his thanks and to assure the Government that Germany would never be the first to violate Belgian neutrality. After the Belgian Minister in Paris had explained that the forts protected both frontiers, and that the Belgian Army would be the vanguard of the defender of

<sup>1</sup> Lady Gwendolen Cecil: *Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, vol. IV.

<sup>2</sup> De Ridder: *La Crise de la Neutralité Belge de 1887*.

Belgian neutrality, whether the latter came from the south or the east, the French Government expressed their complete satisfaction. London was no less pleased with the project, and the Belgians were told that England would be all the more inclined to come to their assistance as they were taking the necessary measures to help themselves.

In spite of these new sacrifices for her defence and of the impartial attitude of her Government during and after the Franco-Prussian War, Belgium remained an object of suspicion to her two neighbours.

A legend spread in France that a secret treaty had been concluded between Belgium and Germany. All kind of inventions, sometimes substantiated by faked documents, were circulated through the Press and the public. King Leopold was accused of plotting with Bismarck against France and the latter was said to have declared that Belgium could help Germany "by allowing a German army to cross her territory." The famous campaign of Madame Adam, who published in the *Nouvelle Revue* a series of sensational articles entitled: "Belgium sold to Germany," made so deep an impression in French circles that, in spite of all Belgian denials, it was not yet forgotten on the eve of the Great War.

Similar suspicions prevailed in Germany. Bismarck took umbrage at every hostile article which appeared in the Belgian papers and the German Press seemed increasingly eager to pick quarrels. A Belgian minister could not act courteously towards France or her representatives without being accused of nourishing a bitter hatred towards Germany and of infringing his international duties. Many of these attacks repeated Bismarck's arguments used in his confidences to Schouvalow. If Belgium did not observe a strict neutrality (that is to say, did not conform to the German interpretation of that neutrality), Germany would consider herself released from all obligations.

At the same time no opportunity was lost of instilling

into the Belgians a distrust of France. William II himself declared, in 1895, to the Belgian Minister in Berlin that he had obtained proofs that the French intended to capture the forts of the Meuse valley which would serve as a basis of operations against the Reich. It was for revealing this secret that Dreyfus had been condemned. The conversation ended with these parting words: "I am not the dangerous neighbour."<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered that the leaders of German policy still hoped at that date to further their plans by economic expansion. German commercial and financial interests in Antwerp were increasing so rapidly that, in 1905, *The Times* alluded to the "economic vassalage" of Belgium.

The tide apparently turned in 1904, the adoption of the Schlieffen Plan coinciding with the formation of the Anglo-French Entente, the rapid increase of the German Navy, and the stiffening of German policy in Morocco. This plan provided, in case of war with France and Russia, for an overwhelming attack against France through Holland and Belgium, bringing about a rapid solution of the conflict on the western front, and allowing Germany and her Allies to turn their forces against Russia before the Czar had had time to mobilize his own armies. From that moment the rule of law may be considered as virtually ended, since one of the guarantors of the treaties was already bent on ignoring its obligations.

(11) During these thirty-three years, from the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War to the adoption of the Schlieffen Plan, the Belgian people, absorbed in their economic and intellectual activities, felt reluctant to listen to King Leopold's warnings. Most of them lived in the fond hope that, after weathering the last storm, their security was established on such sound legal foundations that they need no longer exert themselves in building up an adequate defensive system. On the other hand, the

<sup>1</sup> De Ridder in *Histoire de la Belgique Contemporaine*.

enormous increase in numbers and equipment of the armies of the Great Powers implied for neutral Belgium sacrifices which seemed out of proportion with the danger which might threaten her. This armament race was the natural consequence of a new grouping of the Powers which made the country's position far more vulnerable than before.

From 1848 to 1870, the rivalry between Prussia and Austria, the bonds of friendship created between France and Italy and the attitude of the various Powers towards the Eastern Question had prevented the formation of a rigid system of alliances. England had remained more or less aloof from Continental rivalries, enjoying the authority of an independent arbiter. Belgium could not but benefit from this situation, since any attempt made against her could easily be checked from London. After 1870, however, her guarantors found themselves gradually drawn into two opposite camps. Austria in 1879, and Italy in 1882, joined Germany in the Triple Alliance which obtained for a time hegemony on the Continent. This move was countered, in 1896, by the alliance of France and Russia. Even Great Britain felt obliged to abandon her independent attitude, in order to form an Entente with France in 1904, and to come to a better understanding with Russia in 1908. These systems of alliances grew on parallel lines for many years, piling up naval and military armaments, until it became evident that Belgium would become involved in a conflict between her two groups of guarantors. This danger was increased by the powerful lines of fortifications erected on both sides of the Franco-German frontier, any attack from either of the two Powers through Belgium giving the aggressor a considerable advantage over his enemy.

In fact, by 1904, Europe had returned to the disastrous régime of alliances and coalitions which she had endeavoured to abandon in 1851 by adopting a method of neutralization preventing any nation or group of nations from disturbing the balance of power. The Powers were now divided

among themselves, and force remained their last argument. As the conflict appeared more and more imminent, the temptation to attack through neutralized territory grew in proportion to the interests involved.

When, on the day of his accession to the throne, King Albert spoke of his responsibilities and duties, he realized the full meaning of his words. He was sufficiently familiar with Belgian diplomatic history to appreciate the position in which he was placed. It was, in more senses than one, a central position. Belgian neutrality had become the keystone of international law. It occupied the cross-roads of spiritual strategy. Any total or partial surrender would have brought down the whole edifice and nullified the efforts of a century. To all other nations, except Switzerland, could the fine words of Nurse Cavell be applied: "Patriotism is not enough. . . ." Not so to Belgium, for her patriotism was founded on a system of rights and obligations which superseded national interests. She had been set free in order to guard the gate. Had she failed, her faithful guarantors would have failed with her. They might still have won the War. They would have lost the only chance of restoring a true peace.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

### The Gathering of the Clouds (1904-1914)

(1) THE question has often been asked whether Leopold II would have observed the same attitude as Albert I if he had still occupied the throne in 1914. This question implies a doubt which is both unfair and unfounded. The old Monarch would obviously have been unable to place himself at the head of his troops and to stand the strain of a military campaign, but there is no reason whatever to suppose that he would not have resisted the German ultimatum in the same spirit and for the same reason. Throughout his many speeches, notes and letters it is impossible to discover a line which justifies the opinion that he would have hesitated to defend the country's independence with all the means at his disposal. It must not be forgotten that the first criticisms directed against him were due, neither to his private life nor to his administration of the Congo. The origin of his unpopularity, more particularly among the Catholics, must be sought in the dismissal of the d'Anethan Ministry and in his urgent demands for military preparations. As early as 1871, answering Baron d'Anethan's objections on this very subject, he wrote: "Between my popularity and my duty, I do not hesitate . . . a popularity purchased by deceiving the country as to its true interests would be a weight on my conscience which I do not wish to carry."

In fairness to the Statesmen who were unable or unwilling to support King Leopold's military policy, it must be said that the Governments which succeeded each other, during the second part of his reign, were placed in a somewhat false position. Their sole means of educating public opinion would have been to insist on the inadequate

character of the Powers' guarantee and on the weakness of the country's defences. The first argument had necessarily to be avoided, since it would have stirred foreign susceptibilities which were only too sensitive; the second might have encouraged the military interference of any Power or group of Powers anxious to secure a foothold on Belgian territory on the pretext of protecting her.

The King found in General Brialmont and in Emile Banning, an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, two invaluable collaborators. Brialmont prepared a plan of fortifications barring the road of the Meuse at Liège and at Namur. Banning drafted, in 1886, a confidential memorandum prophesying not only the future development of European politics, but also the use Germany was to make of the Meuse valley for a surprise attack against France, in violation of Belgian neutrality. "Were the siege of Liège to last but ten days," wrote Banning thirty-eight years before the event, "it would give a sanction to our neutrality and save the prestige of the Belgian name."

The question at issue was whether the country would be satisfied in perfecting and completing the works surrounding Antwerp, or would undertake the building of the new forts projected by Brialmont. The partisans of the first alternative were in favour of a retreat on Antwerp in case the Field Army failed to prevent the progress of the invader, while the defenders of the second wished to stop, or at least to check, the invasion close to the southern or eastern frontier through the *forts d'arrêt* round Namur and Liège. King Leopold supported the latter with all his might and succeeded in persuading M. Beernaert, his Prime Minister, to foster the project in spite of the opposition of some of his followers. Fretting against delay, he wrote a series of urgent letters to him: "I implore you not to let the project of the Meuse drag any longer. . . . It is extremely important that the Meuse affair should be given precedence over recruiting. I

implore you, and even pray you, dear Minister, to ask that it be thus and, if need be, to urge it.”<sup>1</sup>

After the necessary credit had been voted by the Chamber, in 1887, it was believed that the decision had been prompted by Berlin, owing to the *démarches* made by the German Minister in Brussels, but the publication of Banning’s memorandum and of the King’s correspondence with Beernaert have since shown plainly that the idea was conceived in Brussels and that the interest of Belgium alone determined its execution. For reasons of economy, the Government had to curtail Brialmont’s plans for the defence of Liège and the fort commanding the crossing of the Meuse at Visé had to be sacrificed. The importance of this omission was fully realized in 1914.

The success of the royal policy with regard to the forts of the Meuse was more than outweighed by the defeat, in the same year, by a narrow majority, of a Bill reforming the army and suppressing the practice of substitution. The King had pinned his faith to the introduction of general personal service which seemed to him essential to the efficiency and morale of the troops. It was, besides, a democratic reform supported by the Radical-Socialist opposition, and might have been carried by a non-party vote. Leopold II was never reconciled to this defeat. For nearly forty years, he earned for himself the nickname of “militarist ogre” by keeping the question open and by alluding to it in more or less veiled terms on every occasion.

In December 1890, he publicly presented his nephew Albert to his future companions, on his entrance into the *Ecole Militaire*. The Prince was then a boy of sixteen, and did not suspect that, a month later, he would suffer the loss of his elder brother and become heir to the throne. The scene must nevertheless have made a strong impression on his mind. He was standing in the square of the old Abbey of La Cambre, in which the College was then established, facing his schoolfellows and their teachers, while

<sup>1</sup> Van der Smissen: *Leopold II et Beernaert*.

the King spoke slowly, weighing every word. It was not the formal speech usual on such an occasion: "Men have days of trial for which they must be prepared. Nations pass through crises as do ordinary men. There comes a fatal hour when their existence is threatened and when a well-organized army is the safeguard of their institutions and liberties."

(2) It was not merely a coincidence that Leopold II paid a visit to the German Emperor in January 1904, at the time when the latter was about to adopt the aggressive military plans of his General Staff. A few months before, during a short stay in Vienna, the King had noticed that he was no longer *persona grata* with the Central Powers, and he wished to ascertain whether certain rumours relating to Germany's attitude were based on solid foundations. He therefore expressed his intention of calling on William II on the occasion of his birthday, and the latter, according to von Bülow, decided to seize this opportunity to bring Belgium over to the German side.

The interview took place on the evening of the 28th, just before dinner. The King intended to leave the same evening. Nothing shows better the lack of understanding of individuals and nations which led the Emperor astray than the method he employed to persuade Leopold to abandon his neutral policy. Aware that the Belgians were proud of their traditions and that their historians extolled the achievements of the Burgundian period, he endeavoured to dazzle the old Monarch with the wild vision which wrecked the brilliant career of Charles the Bold. Trading on Leopold's reputation as a megalomaniac, he sketched the alluring picture of a new Belgium, including French Flanders, Artois and the French Ardennes. He urged him to increase his army by raising black troops in the Congo. "In the formidable struggle which will take place," he declared, "Germany is certain of victory, but this time you will be obliged to choose. You will be with us or against

us. If you are with us, I shall give you the Flemish Provinces which France took from you, in defiance of all right. I will create again for you the Duchy of Burgundy. You will become the Sovereign of a powerful Kingdom. Think of what I offer you and what you may expect."

After the first shock of surprise, the King remarked, laughing, that some time had elapsed since the fifteenth century and that, even if he himself were to entertain such ambitious projects, neither his ministers nor his Parliament would for one moment consider them. The Emperor, maddened by this cool reply, lost all patience and declared that he could not have any esteem for a Monarch who was responsible for his actions to mere ministers and deputies, instead of to God who rules the heavens, that he would not stand any pleasantry, and that if Belgium did not side with him he would be guided only by strategical reasons. "I expected only praise and understanding from you," he concluded, "it seems that I have been deceived."<sup>1</sup>

The guests at the dinner noticed the Kaiser's angry expression and the haggard look on the face of the King. Before leaving, the latter managed to take the Chancellor apart and said gravely: "The Emperor told me appalling things. I rely on your good influence, your wisdom and your experience to avoid great calamities." He was in the uniform of the Prussian Dragoons and was so agitated that, while he drove with the Kaiser to the railway station, he wore his helmet back to front, with the eagle at the back.

The situation was all the more tragic as King Leopold was obviously unable to reveal to his people the danger which confronted them. He confided in Baron van der Elst<sup>2</sup> and once more urged his ministers to prepare for the worst. He also wrote to M. Wiener, an influential Liberal Senator, begging him to do his utmost to persuade his colleagues: "But speak in your name. The Belgians bristle

<sup>1</sup> Von Bülow's *Memoirs*.

<sup>2</sup> Van der Elst: *La Préméditation de l'Allemagne* (*Revue de Paris*, August 1923).

when I permit myself to give them advice. And yet, who is better placed than I to speak of patriotic anxieties?"

The celebration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of Belgian Independence was the occasion of a series of prophetic speeches. At first the people were pleased to see their Sovereign, who had of late taken little part in public functions, preside over their festivities, but when they noticed that instead of conventional orations he gave them stern warnings, referring again and again to the pressing need of military reform, they resented these pessimistic utterances. In Brussels, there was an animated discussion between the King and M. Beernaert, who now opposed the royal policy, an unforeseen item in the programme witnessed with some surprise by the crowd assembled before the Palace of Justice. In the Antwerp Exchange, Leopold II, disregarding etiquette, appealed directly to his audience, asking them whether they were willing to be led "down the fatal path of decadence." These words did not overcome the stubborn resistance of those who had decided that the Belgian Army should be "an army whose destiny is not to fight," but the King did not relax his efforts. In one of his last letters to M. Wiener, dated February 1909, he still urged his favourite theme: "It is indispensable that we have a good army, that we may be able to defend ourselves, and thus, in conformity with our international obligations, stop anyone from passing through the country, or at least make the passage as onerous as possible for whoever should try it. . . . Nowadays, unfortunately, treaties are no longer respected."<sup>1</sup>

It was only nine months later that the new Bill introducing personal service, adopted by the Chamber, was discussed in the Senate. On December 14th the King awaited anxiously the result of the vote. He was lying dangerously ill at Laeken, having undergone a severe operation, when the document was at last submitted to him.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Daye: *Leopold II.*  
L. de Lichterelde: *Leopold of the Belgians*, p. 275.

He managed with a great effort to trace his signature in a trembling hand. Three days later he passed away.

(3) A last interview had taken place, on December 13th, between Leopold and the heir to the throne. The King realized by this time that his end was near and devoted his last moments of lucidity to warn the Prince against the danger of invasion from outside and division from within.<sup>1</sup> Leopold had not given his successor many opportunities to prepare for the part he was to play. Did he endeavour to repair this omission during this last meeting? Did he remind the Prince of his dramatic interview with the Kaiser and of the urgent necessity of improving the country's defences? Did he refer to the steps he had recently taken in order to obtain from the Powers the grant of certain commercial privileges to Germany, especially in the South American market, in the hope that these advantages would deter the Emperor's advisers from their military projects? All we know is that the perilous position in which Belgium was placed haunted his mind to the last. He alluded to it to his Prime Minister, M. Schollaert, whom he saw on the same day. Fearing that the Senate might reject the military reform for which he had battled for so many years, he suggested that Prince Albert might attend the sitting and register his vote in favour of the Bill. To M. Schollaert's objection that this would be contrary to the custom and might harm the Prince's popularity, he answered: "Popularity! I have had it and it left me, it runs like the tide and is as light as froth. It is not even froth, nothing remains of it, nothing."

This confession explains to a great extent the tragic misunderstanding which alienated the people from their Sovereign. The latter's patriotism both with regard to the Congo and to national defence cannot be questioned. It had become the dominating passion of a great man, whose private happiness had been wrecked by the loss of

<sup>1</sup> T. de Tichtervelde: *Revue Générale*, March 1934.

his son and the estrangement of two of his daughters. While remaining throughout loyal to his constitutional oath, Leopold II resented every obstacle placed in his way, and his superior intelligence and imperious will rebelled against narrow-minded criticism. He played into the hands of his adversaries by repeatedly showing this resentment and rebellion. His pride did him more harm in the mind of the people than his relationship with Baroness Vaughan or the more or less legendary scandals circulated about him. The Belgians would have been less inclined to expose his weakness if he had not so haughtily asserted his strength. The lack of sympathy was mutual; both King and people fell into the habit of considering each other's faults more than each other's qualities. The gap which separated them was, no doubt, increased by political intrigue and by the wild exaggerations of a hostile Press, but these would not have caused so much harm had the Sovereign been more patient and his people more trustful. Popularity is indeed fragile, but it is an indispensable weapon in a modern King's armoury. It must be nursed and cared for like an ignorant child and not scorned like a grown-up fool; it must, above all, be respected and humoured. In politics as in education, the shortest way is not always the surest, and there is no binding loyalty between leader and people unless both sides are prepared to make concessions.

Prince Albert stood a silent witness to this tragedy. Though unable, at the time, to mitigate its effects he must have felt its injustice. From the day of his accession he never lost an opportunity of paying homage to the great patriot who had striven so hard, if sometimes unwisely, for the material prosperity of Belgium and for the preservation of her independence. His words were more than the mere tribute inspired by courtesy. Besides justifiable criticism, there had been slanderous attacks and gross calumnies. King Albert went out of his way to contradict them and to hasten the time when his predecessor's efforts would be appreciated with fairness and impartiality. The old King

was fond of saying that he would be satisfied if people rendered him justice twenty years after his death. When King Albert paid his first official visit to London after the War, in July 1921, he presided over the annual dinner of the Royal Literary Fund. Referring in his speech to the occasion when Leopold II had occupied the same chair, he made a point of asserting, before the English writers who surrounded him, his admiration and respect for his “well-beloved uncle.” He felt, no doubt, that such reparation was due to the memory of the old Monarch in the great city where his reputation had been so bitterly and often so unfairly attacked.

(4) It would be easy to dwell on the contrast between the characters and destinies of these two great men by darkening the stern figure of Leopold II and emphasizing all the sympathetic features of Albert I. Great play might be made of the opposition between the King who ruled through will-power and cleverness and the King who ruled through love and persuasion; between the Sovereign who aimed at the material aggrandisement of his country and used all means at his disposal to achieve this end, and the Sovereign who saved her independence and raised her moral reputation to the very first rank in the civilized world; between the leader who fought for power and the leader who fought for honour; between the ally of bankers and capitalists and the friend of artists and men of science; between the champion of the World and the champion of the Spirit. . . .

King Albert would have been the last to appreciate such comparisons. He was indeed simple in his manner, but his broad intelligence did not recoil before the puzzling complexity of life. He was not inclined to judge harshly those who exerted their activity in a field foreign to him, or to despise aspirations which were not his own. He realized that “it takes all sorts to make a world,” and that circumstances play an important part in the shaping of human

destinies. King Leopold was a true representative of his age; he belonged to a generation in which wealth and prosperity had acquired a kind of moral prestige and when good was often confused with goods, the harsh period when time was money and business was business. According to his lights, he devoted all his energies to the creation of a colony where his over-populated country might find a store of raw material and open markets for her industries. Art was for him mere luxury. Having found no happiness in a marriage contracted for political reasons, he did not believe in the blessings of the family and was too proud to pretend to virtues which he did not possess. He worked like a giant and achieved wonders, but his was nevertheless a melancholy life. Wealth was only, for him, a means to an end, and even power could bring no lasting comfort. Had the little Count of Hainault lived it might all have been very different. Many years later, after one of his most striking successes, one of his collaborators remarked: "The King is very lucky."—"Lucky!" he exclaimed, "I have lost my son."<sup>1</sup>

(5) The clouds which had darkened Leopold II's last years did not disperse after his death. To all appearances, the relations between Belgium and Germany remained undisturbed. The Kaiser was no doubt resolved not to renew his attempt, which had failed in 1904, to bribe Belgium into an alliance, and the German Staff remained confident that no serious opposition would be made to the passage of their troops once the small country was faced with the threat of devastating war. German premeditation is clearly shown in a most important document which has not been given the prominence it deserves. This is a telegram from William II to his Chancellor dated July 30th 1905: "If England declares war, your Excellency must immediately send two Notes, one to Brussels, and the other to Paris, to invite the French and Belgian Governments to

<sup>1</sup> P. Daye: *Leopold II.*

make known their intentions within six hours. Belgium must be invaded at once after the declaration of war.”<sup>1</sup> Von Bülow approved this scheme, but insisted on the advisability of keeping the Belgians in ignorance of Germany’s intentions, in order that they should not warn the French. This explains the reassuring statement made the same year by Count von Walwitz, German Minister in Brussels, concerning “the maintenance of the guarantee treaty concluded at the birth of present-day Belgium . . . a political axiom which no one could attempt to alter without committing the most serious offence.”

The first call paid in 1910 by the new King of the Belgians and his Queen, during their tour of the European capitals, was to Berlin. King Albert’s mother being a Hohenzollern and the Queen a Bavarian Princess, this courtesy was due to the German Court. In October, William II and the Kaiserin visited the World’s Fair, which had opened in Brussels in the spring.<sup>2</sup>

The Kaiser’s attitude, during the few days which he spent in the Belgian Capital, gratified the feelings of the people. He admired their fifteenth-century Town Hall, “a jewel of architecture, a treasury of historical memories,” he congratulated them in his public speeches on “their indefatigable activity in all domains,” and on the “achievements of their artists and poets.” He expressed the wish that the relations between the two countries “already full of confidence and neighbourliness” should be “still further strengthened,” and that the King’s reign “should spread happiness and prosperity among his Royal House and his people. . . .” He went further. In a private talk with Baron van der Elst, he took pains to assure him that Belgium had nothing to fear from Germany: “You will have no grounds of complaint against us. I have a great

<sup>1</sup> *Die Grosse Politik d. Europ. Kabinette*, 1871–1914. See also the secret report sent by William II to his Chancellor, through von Schoen, in December 1904.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 78.

affection for your King who, through his mother, belongs to our House. I will allow no one to do him harm. I understand perfectly your country's situation. . . . I shall never place her in a false position."<sup>1</sup>

The next year, answering an inquiry made from Brussels through diplomatic channels, Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg denied the rumours according to which Germany had any intention of violating Belgian neutrality in case of war. This was followed in 1915 by several official declarations to the same effect made in the Reichstag by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, von Jagow, and by the Minister of War, von Heeringen.

It is somewhat difficult to believe that this series of statements could have been made with sincerity. The Kaiser was fully aware of the plans made by his General Staff. How could his ministers have been kept in ignorance of them at a time when they had found their way into the military papers and such popular publications as von Bernhardi's *Deutschland und die nächste Krieg*?

In his memoirs, Baron von der Lancken explains how Holstein, who ruled over the Wilhelmstrasse in 1904, and von Schlieffen, the German Chief of Staff, helped each other in engaging their country in a warlike policy hostile to France and in preparing a surprise attack through Holland and Belgium.<sup>2</sup> Von Moltke, Schlieffen's successor, first adopted this plan but altered it, at a later date, probably in 1909, when it was decided to respect Dutch territory and to proceed through Belgium from Liège.<sup>3</sup> We know, through the publication of M. Paléologue's diary, that the Schlieffen Plan was revealed to the French Foreign Office and General Staff as early as April 1904, and that it was communicated, a few months later, to the British authorities through M. Paul Cambon.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Van der Elst: *La Préméditation de l'Allemagne*.

<sup>2</sup> *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre*, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Von Bredt: *Die Belgische Neutralität u. der Schlieffensche Feldzugsplan*, 1929.

<sup>4</sup> *Revue des Deux Mondes*, October 1932.

There is, besides, some evidence that Herr von Jagow was not unacquainted with the projects of the German General Staff. Speaking to the French Ambassador in Berlin, in April 1904, he suggested that small European nations, such as Belgium, could not maintain their independent position in view of the economic transformation which Europe was undergoing, and were bound to disappear or to gravitate into the orbit of some great Power. This conversation was reported by Baron Beyens, Belgian Minister in Berlin, to his Government.

In his *Considerations on the World War*, published in 1919, Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg, writing of Belgian neutrality, insists on the constant friction which occurred in pre-War days between the German political and military authorities on this question. He also admits that he was finally obliged to adopt the views of the General Staff. The submissiveness of the German Ministers to the argument of military necessity can therefore scarcely be questioned, and the fatal misunderstanding caused in Belgian circles by their reassuring declarations shows only too plainly that international affairs cannot properly be conducted if the heads of Foreign Departments express merely their personal opinions, when they are supposed to define to the world the considered views and intentions of their Governments.<sup>1</sup>

(6) Both William II and Albert I were among those who followed the gun-carriage which bore the body of Edward VII to the grave. Whatever opinion one might have entertained about the Kaiser—and he had already given conclusive proofs of his reckless bravado—it was impossible not to be impressed by his attitude. He bestrode his charger with such easy assurance that the poverty of his physique passed unnoticed. With upturned moustachios, expanding chest, the Field-Marshal's baton resting on his thigh, he looked the part admirably. His eyes wandered over the crowd and none could meet his look without feeling un-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 58.

comfortable under its hard and haughty stare. If a great actor had thus impersonated the modern "man of destiny," his performance could not have been more convincing. The realization that here was indeed the Monarch who controlled the most powerful engine of war ever conceived and perfected in the world, and on whose caprice the security of all his neighbours depended, gave the onlookers the ominous premonition of the nearing catastrophe.

Behind this shining figure the King of the Belgians followed, lost among other dignitaries, his head slightly bent. There was something awkward in his demeanour, as if public attention instead of exciting him cramped and hindered his movements. He appeared at the same time embarrassed and absent-minded. Was he thinking of the effect which the loss of the great Peacemaker might have on the political situation of Europe and on the security of his own country? His thoughts were certainly not concerned with his surroundings; he seemed miles away from the historical scene in which he was taking part.

Who would have foreseen, on this brilliant day of May 1910, that the swaggering helmeted hero's years of splendour were numbered and that the man principally responsible for the failure of his colossal enterprise would be the shy young soldier who occupied such a modest place in the procession? If anyone had indulged in such a prophecy at the time, he would have been considered an irresponsible dreamer; he would have been told that fairy-tales were no longer in fashion in the twentieth century, and that the heroic deeds of knight-errants were incompatible with the achievements of modern technique in armaments. People would have smiled at the idea that mere moral power could upset the balance of material equipments, and that the strength of a good cause could be successfully opposed to that of the "shining armour" and the "mailed fist." This mad dreamer would nevertheless have been the true realist and the supposed realist would have been the dreamer.

There was a popular belief in those pre-War days that, owing to the enormous increase in numbers and material, the result of the struggle could scarcely be influenced by the personality and the prestige of national leaders. Given sound generalship and industrial organization, success was sure to be on the side of superior preparations. The only voice to be heard would be that of the big guns. No error has been more completely exposed by the experience of the Great War. The German Staff had foreseen almost everything. They knew that the Russians would be hampered by lack of communication; they foresaw that the French would mass their forces towards their eastern frontier and were ill-prepared for a surprise attack from the north; the time-table of their march on Paris was calculated almost hour by hour; but they did not suspect that they would take twenty days to cross Belgium and that King Albert's answer to their ultimatum would bring against them from the very first, not only the British Fleet and the British Expeditionary Force, but the whole manhood of the British Empire. The most perfect machine is not immune against accidents, and its very perfection makes it more vulnerable.

The duel between the German Emperor and the Belgian King is perhaps one of the most conclusive examples in modern history of the paramount importance of a wise and inspiring leadership. There is no doubt that, in spite of his political errors and his wayward outbursts, the Kaiser had struck the imagination of his people and that they loyally rallied around him when they fancied that their country was the victim of a dark conspiracy, but it is equally evident that, as month succeeded month, among the civilians as among the soldiers, this false glamour gradually faded until he stood revealed in his true colours. Ministers and generals began to dread his interference, and his instability in critical periods weighed heavily on their minds. He lacked neither intelligence nor energy, but there was a weak strain in his character which showed in adversity. A rapid

victory would have suited him admirably and one can quite well imagine the eloquent harangues with which he would have hailed it, to the deepest humiliation of his enemies and the highest gratification of his subjects. But the long grinding process of a four years' conflict was too much for him. He refused every opportunity of concluding a reasonable peace and when, at the last stage, his own people turned against him, he had not even the courage to face their anger and sought refuge in flight.

The young kinsman whose confidence he betrayed was wrought of another metal. He was looked upon by his people as the ideal constitutional monarch, giving them the wisest advice with firmness, but with unalterable calm. He was beloved as a good king, sympathetic to the poor, fond of science, literature and the arts of peace. He walked in a halo of kindness and domesticity. Many Belgians had almost forgotten the place their Constitution gave him of Commander-in-Chief of their Army, just as they had forgotten that their neutrality needed a strong defence. They discovered suddenly that the man of peace was also a warrior. They found him standing at the gate, their surest guardian and protector.

Their loyalty resisted the strain of the War, which was felt in Belgium even more than in Germany, for the Army was severed from the people and the men in the trenches were without news from home; the civilians were isolated from the rest of the world, depressed and misled by hostile propaganda, subjected to persecutions and physical privations. They would not admit defeat, but after a few years their hopes grew faint and there seemed scarcely any difference between occupation and annexation. By ordinary standards such a people, under such circumstances, might well have lost heart and blamed the leader who had placed them in this plight and had apparently not succeeded in bringing them relief. Why did the Belgians see the image of their king and defender grow more and more distinct with every month that passed? When Albert I was jeered

at by his enemies as the King without a country, *Albrecht Lackland*, he was closer to his people than when he lived among them. When William II was hailed by his courtiers as the conqueror of the world, he was already tottering on the brink of public scorn. The War was the acid test which brought out the true heroism of the simple man and the weakness of the stage hero.

This straightforward conflict between King and Emperor, law-defender and law-breaker, was too soon obscured. Other circumstances intervened which blurred the issue. By the end of the struggle, it appeared so far distant that the peacemakers at Versailles seem to have lost sight of it. They undertook, within a few weeks, to transform the map of Europe and lay the foundation of a new international order, but they almost neglected the basic question of the violation of the 1839 Treaties and of their defence, which had brought Great Britain into the War and had been the strongest moral support of the Allied cause. The two principal characters in the world drama did not even appear. The Kaiser remained comfortably in his Dutch castle while the German people were rendered responsible for his actions. And the sound of the great voice which had stirred the world four years before was drowned by that of the brass bands of victory.

(7) While Germany encouraged the Belgians' optimism by the most reassuring declarations, the French and British authorities were beginning to doubt their ability and even willingness to defend themselves. The neutrality of the country was never seriously threatened by the Powers of the Entente, but they questioned the adequacy of her military preparations and were inclined to misinterpret her refusal to take part in any preliminary arrangements.

After the Tangiers incident, Sir Edward Grey authorized the War Office to ascertain the situation, and the British Military Attaché in Brussels had a series of interviews with General Ducarne, the Belgian Chief of Staff, in January—

April 1906. Colonel Barnardiston wished to find out the measures which Belgium intended to take if Germany, in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, violated the country's neutrality. He was also instructed to discuss with the military authorities the best means which British Headquarters might use, in that eventuality, to support Belgian resistance. The outcome of these confidential conversations was a report drafted by General Ducarne and entitled: *Dispositions à prendre pour favoriser l'intervention d'une armée anglaise dans le cas d'une atteinte à notre neutralité par l'Allemagne.*<sup>1</sup> It is this report which was found by the Germans among the Belgian State papers, and which was published with great effect by the German Press during the War, in a falsified form. This document, together with the account of the conversations which took place in 1912 between the British Military Attaché, Lieut.-Colonel Bridges, and the Belgian Chief of Staff, General Jungbluth, was considered at the time, and is still considered in certain German quarters, as evident proof that Belgium had infringed her neutrality several years before the Great War. By siding with Germany's potential enemies, so the argument runs, Belgium had already forfeited the guarantee derived from the 1839 Treaties, and Germany could no longer be accused of violating Belgian neutrality when she invaded the country in August 1914.<sup>2</sup>

The obvious answer to this argument is that a Government—even a neutral Government—can only be held responsible for its own decisions and its own acts. The conversations were followed by no concrete plans and no practical steps were taken to give them effect.<sup>3</sup> If the documents show anything, it is merely that the French and British military authorities feared a German aggression through Belgian territory, just as in 1887 Bismarck

<sup>1</sup> Measures to be taken to facilitate the intervention of a British Army in case Germany infringes our neutrality.

<sup>2</sup> De Ridder: *La Violation de la Neutralité Belge et ses Avocats.*

<sup>3</sup> Wullus Rudiger: *La Belgique l'Équilibre Européen*, p. 65.

Schwertfeger: *Die Belgischen Dokumente (1885-1914)*.

apprehended a French attack through the Meuse valley. The Belgians were urged by the Allies to place their army on a sound footing in 1906–1912, as they had been urged by Germany twenty years before to build the forts of the Meuse. Had the Germans wished to approach the subject with the Belgian Staff in the pre-War period, they would no doubt have met with the same non-committal answer. If Germany did not take such a step it was because she had already made up her mind.

The same elementary discrimination between a simple memorandum and an official decision must be shown in dealing with the *British Documents* published in 1932. In November 1908, Mr. Eyre Crowe drew up for Sir Edward Grey a memorandum on Belgian neutrality and the British guarantee. His conclusions were in full accordance with the orthodox doctrine of the British Government: The obligation of Great Britain to intervene in case of violation could be neither ignored nor repudiated, but the greatest caution was justified with regard to the means and time of intervention. Sir Charles Hardinge appended a minute to this memorandum, stating that the policy of Great Britain would no doubt be influenced by circumstances and that if, for instance, Belgian neutrality were to be violated by France, it was "doubtful whether Russia or England would lift a finger to defend it." Sir Edward Grey added a line to the document: "I am much obliged for this useful minute; I think it sums up the situation very well, though Sir C. Hardinge's reflexion is also to the point." It is evident that the word "minute" is here used for "memorandum," and Lord Grey's letter to *The Times* on the subject, dated November 21st 1932, is sufficiently explicit. Whilst anxious to obtain the opinions of his best advisers, the British Foreign Secretary had no intention of departing from the attitude of his predecessors. This is confirmed by a note of Sir Edward Grey added to a report which reached the Foreign Office in October 1912: "If Germany does not violate Belgian neutrality, no one will do so." The declara-

tions made at a later date by the Foreign Secretary to the Belgian Minister in London agree with this statement.<sup>1</sup>

When reading the official documents relating to that period, one gathers the impression that British and French military experts were doubtful as to the intentions of the Belgian Government. In spite of the most definite declarations made by successive Belgian Foreign Ministers, to the effect that their country would defend her neutrality from whatever side and in whatever quarter it was attacked, Belgium seemed to have lost the reputation for impartiality which she enjoyed in 1870. Pre-War mentality assumed that, instead of being for her an article of faith, neutrality was merely a screen behind which she was preparing to join the side most likely to gain the upper hand. These suspicions were the unavoidable result of the division of the guaranteeing Powers into two rival groups.<sup>2</sup> Great Britain, since her entente with France, no longer enjoyed the position of arbiter that she had held in the previous century; some of her military advisers became naturally suspicious concerning Belgium. A few Belgian officers, on the other hand, and notably General Michel, had persuaded themselves that Great Britain would not hesitate to march with the French through their country to parry a German attack, if she thought it expedient.

The French do not seem to have seriously considered before 1911 the possibility of a German aggression through Belgium, in spite of the fact that the Schlieffen Plan had been revealed to them seven years previously. After the Agadir crisis, General Joffre endeavoured to counter such a danger by preparing a new plan to forestall this move by a march through Belgian territory. At a secret meeting with the heads of the French Government, held in February 1912, he hinted that from a purely military point of view his task would be made easier if he could come to an understanding with the Belgian Government. M. Poincaré discouraged this idea on the ground that a violation of the

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 141, 142.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 117. *Wullus Rüdiger, op. cit., chap. III.*

Belgian frontier was contrary to the treaties and would alienate the Belgians and the British. But the problem was further examined in Franco-British military circles and the conversations which Lieut.-Colonel Bridges, the British Military Attaché in Brussels, had shortly afterwards with the Belgian Chief of Staff, General Jungbluth, and the Minister of War, General Michel, were no doubt the outcome of Joffre's suggestion. They are of particular interest to us because King Albert had knowledge of them owing to his close relationship with his old tutor and friend General Jungbluth.

Lieut.-Colonel Bridges went a step further than Colonel Barnardiston and, in order to find out what the attitude of the Belgian Government would be in case the Allies took the initiative, he boldly declared to the Chief of Staff, on April 23rd, that if war had broken out after Agadir, a British Force would have landed on the coast without waiting for an appeal from the Belgian Government. After consulting the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and no doubt also the King himself, General Jungbluth replied that no military intervention, however well-meant, could possibly take place before a formal appeal had been addressed by Belgium to Great Britain, as one of the guarantors of her neutrality. General Michel was less diplomatic and answered bluntly that, if the British acted in this way, the Belgian guns would be turned against them. "*Nous vous recevriions à coups de canon.*"

When the report of these conversations was published two years ago, they provoked a certain emotion in the British Press. It appeared strange that the Belgians could ever have adopted such an unfriendly attitude towards the Power which had sacrificed so much in order to defend them against the common enemy. The Belgian Government's decision not to conclude any previous arrangements with England and France and not to accept any military help until the German Army had actually crossed the frontier was nevertheless fully justified. The question

had been studied for many years in Brussels and the procedure carefully laid down. It had been foreseen—and further development showed the wisdom of this foresight—that the violator of Belgian neutrality would seize upon any pretext, however unsubstantial, to justify his action. If Belgium had beforehand agreed to a French or British move on her territory, or allowed British or French authorities to appreciate the moment when such a move ought to take place, she would have laid herself open to the reproach of having infringed the terms of the treaties. Whatever her opinion of the Powers' intentions, she was compelled to place them all on the same footing. She could not allow herself to be influenced by any presumption or belief in French or British good faith or in German bad faith. Her plain duty was to defend her neutrality, and that duty obliged her to oppose the passage of any Franco-British forces as long as her frontiers were respected by Germany.

The fact that, in the ultimatum, the Germans invoked French "intentions" to attack through Belgium and that, up to this day, some German publicists have tried to exculpate the Imperial Government by transforming the "conversations" of 1906 into an Anglo-Belgian military "convention," shows that these scruples were not exaggerated.

The King and his Government might have benefited from an agreement with the Entente Powers, and later events reveal only too plainly how the country's defence was handicapped through the absence of a pre-arranged plan, but quite apart from the question of principle, it is doubtful whether this material advantage would have compensated for the loss of moral prestige involved. A strict observance of the treaties had preserved the country's security for over eighty years. Her good name and reputation were at stake; they could not lightly be placed in jeopardy.

It is in this light that General Michel's declarations must be interpreted. Answering further inquiries from the British Naval and Military Attachés, in the course of

September and October of the same year, the Belgian Minister remarked that since Great Britain had entered the Entente he felt that the maintenance of Belgian neutrality was no longer for her an essential question. Since the April conversations he had found it necessary to modify the Belgian defensive plan and to provide against a possible landing of British troops in Flanders. It was to the report of these conversations that Sir Edward Grey added the note referred to above, and showing that, whatever the views of military experts, he had consistently adhered to the orthodox doctrine of non-violation.<sup>1</sup>

The British correspondence must be read in connection with the numerous letters and reports sent by M. Klobowski and his staff to the French Government between April and December 1912. It has already been stated that the French Minister and his Military Attaché were strongly biased against the Government of M. de Broqueville. For them, General Michel's abrupt answers to British inquiries could but reveal a pro-German bias.<sup>2</sup> A series of articles published by the *Vingtième Siècle* at the time, insisting on the danger to Belgium resulting from the Franco-British Entente and on the weakening of the guarantee, were interpreted as expressing M. de Broqueville's personal views, which were supposed to be hostile to France. On the principle that "he that is not with me is against me," any Belgian independent opinion was considered by the French Legation in Brussels as revealing a "malevolent neutrality."

The decisive answer to General Joffre's query reached Paris on November 27th, when General Wilson informed the French General Staff that, in the opinion of the British Foreign Office, "if France should be the first to violate Belgian neutrality, the army of Belgium would certainly join the Germans and the British Government would then be called upon to defend the neutrality of Belgium." It was therefore evident that the French Army had no interest in taking the initiative and General Joffre states that, from

<sup>1</sup> See p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 28.

that day on, he ceased to entertain any idea of a manœuvre *a priori* in that quarter.<sup>1</sup> Belgium's right to decide what constituted a violation and when an appeal ought to be addressed to her guarantors was fully acknowledged by Sir Edward Grey when, speaking to the Belgian Minister in London in April 1913, he said: "We should never think of sending our troops to Belgium before the violation of your neutrality."

In Great Britain and in France, the final decision in matters of policy was very properly left in the hands of the Foreign Secretary and of the Prime Minister responsible to Parliament. In Germany it was left to the military authorities, who were only responsible to the Emperor.

(8) The situation on the eve of the Great War may be summarized as follows: Both sides had their suspicions with regard to Belgium's future attitude and determination to defend herself in any circumstances. The Entente Powers believed that, though inclined to submit to Germany's aggressive designs, on account of the immediate danger of opposing them, Belgium was still hesitating to abandon her neutral position. For reasons both of principle and expediency, they were resolved to abide by the treaties and to respect Belgian neutrality as long as it was not violated by their prospective enemies. Germany's military leaders, on the other hand, had during the last ten years persuaded the Emperor that the only possible way to victory, if war broke out, was an overwhelming attack through Belgium, without any regard for treaty obligations. They hoped that this move would not bring Great Britain into the struggle, at least in time to give the French valuable support, and they trusted that the Belgians would not dare to resist the ultimatum or that, if they did, they would limit their resistance to a military demonstration which would not delay the progress of the German Armies.

The King of the Belgians had perhaps the clearest view

<sup>1</sup> Joffre's *Memoirs*.

of the whole situation, but the position which he occupied prevented him from making it known. He knew from King Leopold's urgent counsels that the Schlieffen Plan had become the official plan. The Kaiser and the Crown Prince had seized the opportunity of his visit to Germany to impress him with military displays which left no doubt concerning the state of German preparedness. King Albert was confident that, in spite of the suspicions of their military experts, neither Great Britain nor France had any intention of stealing a march on Germany by invading Belgium. He even foresaw the danger of unavoidable delay with regard to the landing of the British Expeditionary Force, and the greater danger of the French plan of concentrating towards the East, without making sufficient preparation for defending the northern frontier or for supporting, in case of need, the Belgian Army. He found himself at the head of a small force without any means of co-ordinating his plan of action with that of his future Allies, and was further paralysed in word and deed by his country's neutral status.

Through a bitter irony of fate, he was later to be accused of concluding secret conventions with the Entente Powers at a time when he could not even listen to their suggestions. We can easily imagine what might have happened if the British Expeditionary Force, instead of landing in France, had landed on the Belgian coast and if the French had been prepared to throw several army corps either on the Meuse or at least between Antwerp and Namur. The story of the defence of Belgian territory by a small and unsupported army should dispose of the legend of Anglo-Belgian military conventions more conclusively even than the documents referring to the uncompromising attitude of the Belgian generals in 1912. Everything which, in different circumstances, might have been done by the Allies to support the Belgians in August and September 1914 was left undone, and it was only in October, after nearly three months of fighting, that the latter were cheered by the sight of French and British uniforms.

Nobody can be rendered responsible for this state of affairs. It was the unavoidable consequence of the international obligations which prevented King Albert and his Staff from entering into any formal agreement with their neighbours. Had General Joffre's suggestion been accepted, the French plan of concentration would, no doubt, have been very different and the French General Staff would have been able to adapt their preparations to a combined action. As it was, the French Generals preferred to take the risk of an attack from the North and to concentrate their attention on a scheme which could be properly studied and prepared. The British, on their side, were obliged to give up the idea of a landing in Flanders and contented themselves with reinforcing the French left wing. The Belgian Army was left in the air. But while the hands of British, French and Belgian commanders were thus tied by the respect of treaty obligations, the German General Staff was able to complete its preparations and to organize the march of their armies through neutral territory. Their information was so perfect that they knew beforehand where to billet their troops and where to make the necessary requisitions. From the very first, they were able to eliminate the element of chance which upset so completely all calculations on the side of the Allies.

(9) Belgium indeed was free to prepare, and King Albert made the most of the few months which were left to him.

The condition of the Belgian Army at the time of his Accession was the natural consequence of the anti-militarist policy pursued by successive Governments for the last fifty years. The field forces of 1909 were inferior to those of 1839 and scarcely superior to the army which had guarded the frontier during the Franco-Prussian War. They were badly trained, ill-equipped and thoroughly demoralized by the vicious system of substitution. The new law abolishing this practice had not yet borne fruit; besides, it did not seriously add to the nation's defensive power, the increase

in the contingent being compensated by a reduction of the time of service. The only serious progress achieved since 1870 was the building of the forts round Liège and Namur and the strengthening of the entrenched camp of Antwerp, but the troops to which the defence of these works had been entrusted were miserably inadequate.<sup>1</sup>

While the German and French Armies had increased tenfold during the last forty years, the Belgian Army had remained practically stationary. The danger of the country's weakness was made more evident since the building of the fortified line from Verdun to Basle, which prevented the rapid progress of the German forces across the French eastern frontier.

King Albert had always realized that if the European conflagration broke out at all it would be in his reign. Fully aware of the responsibilities conferred upon him by the Constitution, he was considering the means of bringing about a speedy reorganization of the Service, when the Minister of War suggested, in 1910, that he should resign his supreme command in favour of some divisional general. This proposal might have suited a sovereign of a less energetic and conscientious character. Danger was imminent; it had been greatly increased by the lack of foresight of the representatives of the nation; the young King was placed in a false position, since the Constitution had entrusted him with a formidable task without providing him with the power of fulfilling it. In the circumstances he might easily have felt justified in placing the leadership of the troops in the hands of an experienced professional soldier.

Such plausible subtleties were foreign to the King's nature. When accepting the Crown and taking the oath, he was determined to serve his country to the best of his ability, in spite of the difficulties which confronted him at home and abroad. He was always ready to listen to expert advice, but he knew that no general, however skilful, could

<sup>1</sup> Tasnier et van Overstraeten in *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. III, p. 8.

inspire the same patriotism and devotion as the Head of the nation, and that his personal leadership would considerably strengthen the country's prestige abroad. Whatever the danger of the European situation and the mistakes and delusions of certain politicians, he could not and would not deprive his people of the help which he had promised to give them.

Instead of resigning his command, he undertook, with the help of Lieutenant-General Jungbluth, who had become his aide-de-camp, the complete reorganization of the General Staff, entrusted not only with the organization of the army, but also with the drawing-up of plans of mobilization and concentration. In June 1910, a Royal Decree created the new *Etat-Major-Général*. The fact that its first Chief was General Jungbluth shows plainly that the King wished to be kept informed of the progress realized and to remain in supreme control.<sup>1</sup>

The next year, the Agadir *coup* brought Europe to the brink of war. A conflict was only avoided because France agreed to cede to Germany an important part of the French Congo. The German Government had also requested from France the cession of her right of pre-emption on the Belgian Congo. This threat against the Belgian Colony was not lost on the King.<sup>2</sup> He learned about the same time that German officers had been provided with exact replicas of the Belgian military maps. He was aware of the activity displayed by German engineers who were building, in the neighbourhood of the Belgian frontier, a series of railway lines and stations out of all proportion with the economic requirements of the district. The anxiety of the Entente Powers had been made evident by General Jungbluth's conversations with the British Military Attaché concerning an eventual landing of British troops on the Flemish coast. Even Baron Greindl, Belgian Minister in Berlin, who for years had maintained the staunchest

<sup>1</sup> Lieut.-General Galot: *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 71.

optimism, began to feel apprehensive. At last, in December 1912, came an urgent warning from the King's uncle, revealing the increasing danger of a German violation of Belgian territory. Questioned by Baron de Gaiffier, Belgian Minister at Bucharest, King Carol declared: "Frankly, I answer that no account will be taken of your neutrality. . . . The miracle of 1870 will not be repeated."<sup>1</sup>

Any other country placed in a similar position might have taken some definite steps to parry the blow, but neutral Belgium could not discriminate between her guarantors and was compelled to assume that they remained loyal to their engagements until a definite breach of the treaties had occurred.

The King's personal attitude, at the time, is made clear by M. Poincaré, who explains how Comte de Mun volunteered to approach the Belgian Court through some influential friend, and was informed that it would be impossible to broach the subject of the defence of Belgium with the French Government. "Belgium," concludes M. Poincaré, "was so scrupulous in the matter that she preferred to sacrifice herself rather than to seem for one moment to ignore her neutrality by entering into such conversations with us."<sup>2</sup>

Confronted with the increasing German menace and unable to accept any foreign help or advice, King Albert was necessarily thrown upon his own resources. When the 1912 elections gave a safe majority to Baron de Broqueville, the latter, at the King's suggestion, took the portfolio of War and introduced a new Military Bill which appeared to answer the urgency of the situation. The scheme increased the annual contingent to 35,000 men, so that after ten years, the total strength of the army would have been well over 300,000.

In order to secure the passage of the Bill, the Prime

<sup>1</sup> Dispatch of December 12th 1912. This warning was given a few days after the death of the Countess of Flanders, King Carol's sister.

<sup>2</sup> Poincaré . . . , *Servir à la France*.

Minister had to canvass individually a large number of his supporters who still retained their old anti-militarist prejudices. In a secret sitting of the Chamber, held on February 19th 1913, he explained the reasons which had determined the King and his Government to propose this measure: "The origin of the Bill," he declared, "must be found in the new military law adopted by Germany in June 1911. This law is the greatest effort which Germany has made since 1870, and will give that country a superiority of 300,000 men over France. During the last summer, we learned that this increase was due to Germany's intention of sending her army across Belgium. This information has reached us from several quarters. Our anxiety is increased by the fact that some definite plans have been communicated to us." The Prime Minister then read various reports showing Germany's intention of rushing 50,000 men against Liège a few hours after the outbreak of hostilities. He concluded by revealing to the Chamber King Carol's solemn warning to King Albert. The majority realized the gravity of the situation and the Bill was finally adopted, but the fact that a secret sitting was needed to obtain a favourable vote shows how the Sovereign and his Prime Minister were handicapped, not only by the reluctance of many deputies to make the necessary sacrifices, but also through the fear of offending Germany by using the only arguments which could enlighten public opinion.

In 1913, the Belgian Military Attaché in Berlin, Major de Melotte, sent several reports to his Government, relating his conversations with General von Moltke. The latter had inquired what the attitude of Belgium would be if a large foreign force invaded her territory. On being told that she would defend her neutrality, the German Chief of Staff pressed Major de Melotte to explain exactly what he meant by the defence of Belgian neutrality. All through these years the German authorities were convinced that Belgium would never dare seriously to oppose an aggression.

She would either accept the ultimatum, already suggested seven years previously by the Kaiser in his letter to von Bülow, or she would content herself with a “formal resistance,” according to the words used by Herr von Kühlmann in 1911: “For instance, in lining up her army along the road followed by the German forces.”<sup>1</sup>

As soon as he was informed of these inquiries, the King asked his military adviser to draft a memorandum summing up their common ideas on the defence of Belgian neutrality. The three main points of this memorandum were the following. It was the King’s intention:

- (1) To declare War at once on any Power which deliberately violates the smallest portion of our territory.
- (2) To wage this war with the utmost energy and with the whole of our military resources wherever required even beyond our frontiers.
- (3) To continue to wage war after the invader has vacated our territory, until the conclusion of a general peace.<sup>2</sup>

This document disposes conclusively of two questions which were discussed in the British Cabinet on the eve of the War: Was Belgium willing to defend her territory in case of violation? Would she take all necessary measures even if this violation were not “substantial”?<sup>3</sup>

(10) It became more and more necessary to ascertain Germany’s intentions. The King, who was Honorary Colonel of a German regiment, took the opportunity of its anniversary fête at Hanover, to pay a visit to Potsdam, on November 6th 1913.

After dinner, the Emperor impressed upon his guest that war with France had become practically “unavoidable” because she was unwilling to negotiate amicably and to respond to his friendly overtures. A crushing victory for

<sup>1</sup> De Ridder in *La Belgique et la Guerre*.

<sup>2</sup> Galet, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Lord Oxford*.

the German Army was a foregone conclusion. The King calmly ignored this hint and replied that he did not share his guest's view of French policy which he considered as entirely peaceful. It would be a great mistake, he added, to attribute to the French Government the opinions of certain irresponsible orators and writers who wielded neither authority nor influence. The Kaiser did not pursue the argument, remembering no doubt his failure to intimidate King Leopold nine years previously. Towards the end of the visit, all doubts which remained in King Albert's mind were dispelled by General von Moltke. The latter took great pains to emphasize the aggressive spirit of the German people and the thoroughness of German preparations, which made it imperative for the weak to side with the strong. "This time we must make an end of it," he declared, "and Your Majesty cannot imagine the irresistible enthusiasm which will permeate the entire German nation on 'The Day.'" Modern war, he added, involved terrible destructions, and small nations such as Belgium would be wise to join the victor if they wished to retain their independence. The Chief of Staff had evidently been instructed to make clear what his master had left in the shadow. Confronted with such a threat, King Albert decided that France should be warned. The proposal of betraying one of Belgium's guarantors to the benefit of the other had been thrust upon him, and he could not conscientiously keep the matter secret. After consulting Baron Beyens, Belgian Minister in Berlin, he asked him to approach M. Jules Cambon.<sup>1</sup>

In his account of the interview, published by the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, the French Ambassador explains that the King, fearing indiscretions, wished the matter to be kept secret. The President of the Republic alone should be informed. "I often thought since," he adds, "that King Albert in taking the decision of warning France of the peril which threatened her, had engaged the policy of his country and that the moment when he took this decision was the

<sup>1</sup> Baron Beyens: *La Neutralité Belge et l'Invasion de la Belgique.*

most critical and decisive of his reign. When in 1914 he ordered his troops to resist the invader, he merely carried out the resolution which he had taken one evening in Potsdam, while being made a party to the Emperor's projects. The latter had plainly proposed to him to betray France, offering him as a reward to divide the spoils. On this evening Albert I, prompted by his feeling of honour, settled the future of his country and of his dynasty."

This conclusion shows how difficult it was for King Albert to make his position clear. He did not "engage the policy of his country" in November 1913 more than at any other date before August 4th 1914. He refused to be made a party to a secret intrigue and hoped, by warning France, to prevent the repetition of useless provocations which caused so much irritation in Berlin. He wished to the last to retain Germany's friendship and courted no alliance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Country's Defence

#### (A) *Preparations*

(1) WHEN he came to the Throne the King undertook two difficult tasks. He wished to obtain from Parliament a large increase in the country's defensive forces, and from the military authorities comprehensive and detailed plans for all measures to be taken in case of aggression from the East, from the South or from the North. Strangely enough, he was more successful with his Parliament than with his General Staff.

Thanks to his popularity and to the friendly relations which he entertained with various political leaders, he succeeded in persuading the Chamber and the Senate to pass a Bill which would have exceeded the boldest wishes of his predecessor.<sup>1</sup> Within three years he was granted a more drastic reform than the one which his uncle had only obtained after a thirty years' struggle. It has been suggested that the German aggression was hastened by this rapid increase of the Belgian forces. It is doubtful whether such secondary consideration influenced the decision of the German authorities who did not seriously take into account Belgian resistance, but the study of the military operations which took place in Belgium in 1914, shows nevertheless that an additional force of even a 100,000 men would have considerably altered the course of events. The full effect of the new law could only be felt after a period of ten years, while the German aggression was launched ten months after its adoption. The words "too late" may be written across this episode, as across so many more important events of the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 123.

War and the after-War periods, but in this case at least the leader cannot be blamed for lack of foresight. The King knew, when he chose M. de Broqueville as Prime Minister in 1910, that he could count upon his support for the reorganization of the Army. Later, by advising his Minister to accept the portfolio of War and to use all the information at the disposal of the Government in order to overcome the resistance of the anti-militarist party, he secured the success of the reform. No constitutional sovereign could have done more or gone further.

With regard to the organization and plans of defence the results were far less satisfactory. Lieut.-General Galet has explained how he worked unceasingly with the King from November 1912 to July 1914, in order to prepare the new army for the forthcoming ordeal, and how most of the measures they favoured were opposed or delayed by the General Staff. A considerable increase in the Field Artillery was contemplated and the Belgians were to be provided with 15 cm. howitzers, but in July 1914 they were still without their heavy guns. A plan of defence had been sketched, based on diplomatic action which seems almost prophetic to-day: "As soon as a diplomatic rupture occurs our ministers in Berlin, Paris and London will be instructed formally to request confirmation of the treaties guaranteeing our neutrality and to insist on a clear, precise and immediate reply. Let us suppose that the replies from France and England are clear, precise and satisfactory, while that from Germany is, at best, evasive. We should then concentrate on the Liège position."<sup>1</sup>

Whether the German forces opposed to the Belgian Army were equal or superior, the defence of the country should commence on the Meuse. This view had already been maintained, as early as 1911, by Lieut.-Colonel de Ryckel, who had worked on the General Staff under General Jungbluth. It had received the approval of the King; the Minister of War had expressed his agreement

<sup>1</sup> Galet: *op. cit.*, p. 15.

in February 1913; but when it came to the preparation of a detailed scheme the General Staff did not produce any useful plan. The fact is that this body of officers had been more and more unwilling to follow the King's leadership since the retirement of General Jungbluth in June 1913. Belgian military experts were divided between two schools, the one favouring a bold aggressive policy, according to the theories in favour in pre-War France, and the other adhering to the old plan of concentrating the whole Field Army in the centre of the country, leaving the defences of the fortresses to their garrisons. The middle course, favoured by the King and his adviser, aimed at carrying the defensive operations as close as possible to the frontier, without endangering the communications with the Antwerp base.

(2) The King's position was a particularly difficult one. He was only placed in supreme command by the Constitution after the outbreak of War, and was unwilling to thrust his views on the General Staff if they disagreed with the considered opinions of older and more experienced soldiers. He had chosen for his military adviser and collaborator a young officer who had just resigned his professorial chair at the *Ecole de Guerre* because his ideas conflicted with the orthodox teaching of the school. A mere captain, however talented, could not be successfully opposed to braided generals. With unruffled patience King Albert waited for an opportunity; the catastrophe against which he was preparing came almost at once. It did not take him by surprise, but it occurred too early to allow him to face the issue as he wished to face it. To the unavoidable deficiency in equipment and numbers were added the difficulties of a divided command.

These became acute when, on July 28th 1914, the King asked the Chief of Staff to make a daily report of the situation. The latter wished the six divisions of the Field Army to be moved from their bases, while the King was of opinion that they should remain there until the country's

enemy had been identified, and then moved to the threatened frontier. The General Staff worked on plans of concentration towards the centre of the country, while the King wished, in case of an attack from the East, that the defence should be carried out on the Meuse, and that the position of Liège should be considerably strengthened. These differences occurred at a time when mobilization was already under way and when the international crisis was at its climax. In order to avoid the danger of chaos and confusion, the Sovereign was obliged to accept the Chief of Staff's plans, but he insisted that the 3rd Division should be kept in Liège and the 4th in Namur. It was only a half-measure compared with his own project of lining up the six divisions from the Dutch frontier to Huy, a disposition which would have efficiently checked the progress of the forces under General Von Emmich, and allowed a safe line of retreat by stages on Antwerp at a much later date.

The Sovereign's disappointment may easily be realized: "During his whole reign," writes Lieut.-General Galet, "his thoughts had been dominated by one central idea—that of preserving his country from being caught unprepared by the outbreak of an unexpected war, and for that purpose he had created a command to formulate a plan of action. . . . The plan—which was that of the defence of the country on the frontiers—he had seen approved by his Government. After four years of intense anxiety, he believed that final unanimity had been reached. For eight months he had pressed for the organization of the defence of the Meuse against possible aggression on the part of Germany. . . . And now disaster was in sight. Nothing that he had intended was ready. The storm found Belgium without a plan and with a command divided against itself."<sup>1</sup>

Not for one moment, however, did the King regret the decision he had taken in 1910, when he had refused to delegate his military command to some professional soldier. Every fresh obstacle strengthened his resolution. He had

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

been reluctant to enforce his views as long as national peril did not require that he should exercise to the full his constitutional powers. When, however, the ultimatum reached Brussels, he found himself released from such scruples. As he expressed it in his speech in Parliament on August 4th, "the time had come to act."

(3) In face of the approaching danger, neutrality had prevented him from seeking support in England and France. His efforts to provide the nation with a strong and well-prepared army had been partly thwarted by delay and procrastination. He was, therefore, compelled to face the oncoming fight with an inadequate armour and a defective weapon. But if, as General Galet suggests, he had a moment of hesitation in assuming supreme command after receiving the Kaiser's telegram which made war inevitable, it was only on account of his innate modesty and his dislike of any kind of display. He would be the only Sovereign of the belligerent nations to assume this post. Both the German Emperor and the Tsar, though nominally in command, preferred to entrust their leadership to their generals. Did the events of August 1831 flash across King Albert's mind? Did he remember the disastrous Ten Days' Campaign during which his grandfather had vainly tried to rally his disorganized and scattered forces against the sudden attack of the Dutch? Eighty-three years previously, Leopold I had also appealed to the guaranteeing Powers and the French Army, under General Gérard, had come in time to save Belgium, but too late to prevent defeat. The King then had only had a few days to make his military preparations and national independence was still in its infancy, but the enemy was one of the smallest States in Europe, not its strongest military Power.

Holland this time was friendly, and King Albert could at least rest assured that the position of Liège could not be turned through an unopposed invasion of Dutch Limburg. As early as July 27th, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs

had suggested to Baron Fallon, Belgian Minister at The Hague, that in case of a German aggression on Limburg, Belgium and Holland ought to combine their defence against the common enemy. The Belgian Minister was informed that the Dutch General Staff considered the possibility of a retreat across Belgian territory if they were confronted by superior forces; it was even discussed whether these forces should be placed under the command of the King of the Belgians. No definite answer could be given by the Belgian Government at the time, since it might have been considered a breach of neutrality. It was never required, for the Schlieffen Plan, revised by von Moltke in 1909, concentrated the attack on Liège. A few days later the Dutch Government received formal assurances from Berlin that Dutch territory would be respected. Its decision to defend Limburg was, nevertheless, of great importance, since it secured the left flank of the Belgian Army at the opening of hostilities.<sup>1</sup>

Before leaving Brussels the King endeavoured to estimate, with the help of his adviser, the forces of the two coalitions. Without counting Great Britain, the armies of the Powers friendly to Belgium (Serbia, Russia and France) totalled sixty-five army corps, while the hostile forces, Germany and Austria, amounted to forty-one. This rough calculation gave thus the proportion of three to two, and suggested that the aggressive plans of Germany must sooner or later prove disastrous. The estimate could not, of course, reckon with the state of preparation of the various Powers and the perfection of their respective equipment. With regard to the ultimate issue, the King possessed that stubborn confidence which he retained even in the darkest hours of the retreat, but concerning the immediate result of the German attack through Belgium he was not unduly optimistic. He knew the weakness of his army and he had every reason to fear the turning movement so carefully prepared by the German Staff. He fully realized that he

<sup>1</sup> De Ridder in *La Belgique et la Guerre*.

could not resist the onslaught of superior forces with the means at his disposal if he did not promptly receive the necessary support from France and Great Britain. The impossibility of coming to an understanding with these Powers, during the previous years, would no doubt compel the British Command to send the Expeditionary Force to France. Everything depended, therefore, on the plan of the French Commander-in-Chief. Here again, and for the same reason, the King was left in the dark. But even in his most conservative estimate he could not foresee that French reinforcements would not enter Belgian territory before fifteen days, and that nearly three months would elapse before the main body of his army could fight shoulder to shoulder with French and British troops.

On August 4th, Mr. Brand Whitlock, the American Minister in Brussels, received the visit of Herr von Strum, Secretary of the German Legation. "These poor stupid Belgians!" he exclaimed, "why don't they get out of the way? I know what it will be! I know the German Army. It will be like laying a baby on the track before a locomotive!"<sup>1</sup>

"Time after time," wrote M. Poincaré, "pitiful appeals are made to us from Liège and Brussels; we should like to respond at once by sending a strong contingent. . . . General Joffre, as Commander-in-Chief, is fully alive to the moral and political significance of the immediate despatch of a force, but the needs of our concentration are inexorable."<sup>2</sup>

#### (B) *Liège*

(1) When, on July 31st, the King received the news that Germany had proclaimed *Kriegsgefahr*, he decided that general mobilization ought to take place at once. Some members of the Cabinet which he summoned favoured partial mobilization, but he insisted that such half-measure

<sup>1</sup> Brand Whitlock: *Belgium under German Occupation*, I, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Poincaré: *L'Invasion*, p. 12.

might be interpreted as a sign of indecision, and the necessary order was issued the same evening. Belgium was thus one day ahead of France and Germany, and the position of Liège was prepared for the German attack on August 5th.

If this attack had been made on the previous day, it might not have been so successfully repulsed. Once more the Germans' expectations were deceived. They had carefully prepared a surprise advance carried out by 50,000 men, on the third day of mobilization, and relied on overwhelming a weak garrison of 6000 Belgians so that, two days later, the armies of von Kluck and von Bülow might sweep through Belgian territory on their way to Paris, without serious opposition. They found instead that the Belgian engineers had blown up the bridges of the district and blocked the railway tunnels. When, after some delay, General von Emmich launched his troops against Liège, he had to meet the stubborn resistance, not only of the garrison, but also of the 40,000 men of the 3rd Division which occupied the intervals between the forts. His assault failed completely, and it was only after his army had been reorganized and reinforced by heavy artillery that the resistance of the last forts was finally broken on August 16th.

This result, which was of capital importance not only for the Belgian, but also for the Allied Command, was entirely due to King Albert's wisdom. Not only had he insisted on early mobilization, but he had ordered that the 3rd Division, instead of joining the rest of the Field Army, should remain in Liège and reinforce the garrison.

He did more. During the first days of hostilities, he again and again supported General Leman, whenever the Belgian General Staff tended to weaken his position. As early as July 29th, the General had ordered the fortress to be cleared for action. On the 1st of August, he was instructed to send one brigade to a neighbouring town and, in spite of the King's intervention, this instruction was repeated at a later date. To put a stop to these orders

and counter-orders, the King wrote a personal letter to General Leman charging him "to hold to the end the position which he had been entrusted to defend." He further assured him of his "entire confidence and friendship." When the General reported, on the 5th, that he was faced with four army corps and asked to be reinforced by the 15th Brigade, the King had once more to overcome the resistance of the Staff which clung to the idea of concentrating the whole Field Army in front of Louvain, and of leaving the *forts d'arrêt* to look after themselves.

Similar difficulties were encountered with regard to the destruction of the Meuse bridges above Liège. General Leman wished to cut these bridges to prevent the forts from being surrounded, but as late as August 4th, the General Staff prevented him from carrying on the necessary demolitions on the ground that they would interfere with the movements of the Belgian Army. Once more the General appealed to the King who supported his proposal. The results of this measure were far-reaching, for it delayed the reinforcements of the right wing of the German Army during the Battle of the Marne and the important operations which followed.

(2) Before starting for Headquarters, which had been established in the Town Hall of Louvain, the King wrote a stirring order of the day, in which he reminded the Flemings of the Battle of the Golden Spurs, and the Walloons of the exploit of the Six Hundred Franchimontois. The gist of the message was in the last sentence: "Soldiers, I am leaving Brussels to place myself at your head."

The atmosphere was electric and it would have been useless to damp the soldiers' enthusiasm with dark prophecies, but when the time came for action the young leader, instead of being carried away by the contagious optimism which surrounded him, had the rare courage to stare reality in the face. He spent the first two days making a careful inspection of the troops in their canton-

ments and visited, one after the other, the four divisions gathered in the district.

From the 1913 manœuvres and a prolonged visit paid to the camp of Beverloo in 1914, he had already gained a clear idea of his army's shortcomings. Not only were the heavy guns lacking and the telephone equipment practically non-existent, but the infantry was insufficiently provided with machine-guns—only 102 for the whole army—and aircraft was in its infancy. The troops were in bad training and incapable of standing long marches; discipline was slack; there was no co-ordination between the units, and organization was deficient. There was a lamentable scarcity of officers and, apart from the veterans who had taken part in the African campaign, the leaders had no military experience. King Albert had more than once pointed out these dangerous defects, notably in a long letter addressed to the Minister of War in 1913, and in several speeches to superior officers during the manœuvres. This last inspection confirmed his worst forebodings. It had been obviously impossible to repair, in a few years, the harm done during a long period of neglect. Unless the Belgian Army was handled with the greatest care, it would be exposed to disaster.

The spirit of the men who went to meet the enemy almost in a festive mood was magnificent, but the King knew enough of modern warfare to realize that the highest morale and the greatest individual courage could not alone overcome the material weight of numbers and guns. This small force of 117,000 men was a precious capital which he could not afford to waste. Apart from 18,000 volunteers who could scarcely be equipped and trained in time to take part in the impending operations, there were no reserves. The preservation of the Field Army was therefore essential. Without it, Belgium would be entirely dependent on the Allies' help and deprived of all means of waging her own fight to the end.

In order to show the deep contrast between the King's sober reflections and the mood which prevailed among the

civilians and the soldiers of all ranks, not excluding the highest, it may be useful to quote the following account given by an eyewitness of the arrival of the 2nd Division at Louvain: "With the first streaks of light, we heard the rhythmic tramp of feet on the Malines road; soon singing became audible . . . ; we could recognize the melody and the words of the "Lion of Flanders." Then, in the grey morning light, the head of the column appeared in the sunken road which reaches the city under the slopes of Mont César. The soldiers passed with a joyful and proud air, in spite of the fatigue of the march, covered with dust and dripping with perspiration, but in perfect order, without stragglers. Soon the streets were lined with spectators, mostly peasants and workmen's wives. The general enthusiasm was shown by the cheering, the echoes of which became fainter as the troops penetrated farther into the town. Never before had Louvain worn such an air of rejoicing with all the houses gay with flags and the streets full of townsfolk preparing a warm welcome for the soldiers. Never before had there been such touching unanimity. Factory girls left their work to bring the soldiers their simple lunches, university professors kept open house and handed round armfuls of bottled beer. The torrent of hospitality was such that the Commandant of the city was forced to take repressive measures in the interests of the health of the men."<sup>1</sup>

(3) This optimism was still increased by the news of the German repulse in front of Liège on August 5th. General Headquarters at once hummed with wild plans for an immediate offensive. The King's reaction was characteristic. While congratulating General Leman on this invaluable success, he warned him that he would certainly be subjected to a night attack and should at once remove his Headquarters to a safe place. It was for neglecting this advice that the General, surprised in the centre of the town

<sup>1</sup> L. van der Essen: *The Invasion and the War in Belgium*.

by a small enemy detachment, was obliged to seek refuge in the fort of Loncin, whence he could not so conveniently conduct the defence.

Almost at the same time, on August 6th in the early morning, it was learned at Headquarters that the 3rd Division was falling back from Liège, and a suggestion was made that the whole army should at once move forward. It has already been explained that it had been the King's former intention to establish the Belgian forces on the strong position afforded by the hills on the left bank of the river, from the Dutch frontier westward, with the support of the forts of Liège and eventually of those of Namur, and that he had only abandoned this plan under the stress of circumstances which he could not control. Such a defensive position, protected by the deep valley of the Meuse, was the strongest which the country afforded, but it was no longer possible to revert, at this stage, to the original plan. The effort made by the Germans against Liège showed that they attached the greatest importance to the success of this operation, and that the army under von Emmich was followed by large forces prepared to invade Belgian territory. Had the King not vetoed the project of an advance the most fatal results would probably have followed. By August 7th, the Germans had already crossed the Meuse in great numbers, and the Belgian Army, tired out by route marches, might have been surrounded by superior forces and cut off from Antwerp.

The Cavalry Division was sent forward to support the retreat of the 3rd Division. When the latter joined the main body of the army, its officers were able to confirm the King in his belief that von Emmich's forces were only the vanguard of a large body of troops. No less than five enemy army corps had been identified. It was decided that, while the 4th Division should co-operate in the defence of Namur, the rest of the army should take up an expectant position between the Gette and the Dyle, in front of Louvain.

Just when this resolution had been taken, news came

from French Headquarters, brought by the Belgian Military Attaché in Paris and by Lieut.-Colonel Brécard. The first announced that the French concentration would be completed by August 11th and that meanwhile a Cavalry Corps under General Sordet would proceed towards the Meuse. French Headquarters expected that the Belgian Army should take the offensive in collaborating with General Sordet in the Liège district, or in falling on the right flank of the German Army on their way to France, south of the Meuse. The second was the bearer of a letter from the Generalissimo advising co-operation between General Sordet's Corps and the Belgian Cavalry in order to reconnoitre the strength of the enemy, and postponing all decisive action until the concentration of the French armies was completed.

In spite of the fact that these two messages were somewhat contradictory, they showed plainly that the French were not only misinformed with regard to the last developments at Liège, but that they had no conception of the importance of the German attack and of its direction. Such errors were no doubt unavoidable and it is impossible to appreciate properly General Joffre's strategy from the point of view of Belgian operations. It must be stated, nevertheless, that while King Albert was awaiting anxiously French and British reinforcements and loyally playing his part at the head of the Allies' vanguard, he was repeatedly subjected to advice and requests which showed that French Headquarters were unaware of the gravity of the situation in the North, and were either unwilling or unable to readjust their plans to meet it. They were still dreaming of manœuvres and offensives when all their energies should have been bent on establishing their defences on a sound position.

Colonel Brécard was sorely disappointed when King Albert declared that it would be impossible for him to comply with the French suggestion. He reported to his Headquarters, not without a touch of bitterness, that the

Belgian defensive plan being based on Antwerp, the Belgian forces would probably be prevented from co-operating with the French in the projected offensive.

This was by no means a faithful interpretation of the King's views. When choosing his position on the Gette he still hoped to check the progress of the German Army through the passage, only twenty-five miles wide, which remained open between the southern forts of Antwerp and the northern forts of Namur. This line of attack appeared to him more threatening than the advance south of the Meuse, for the enemy could sweep through the open plains of Brabant and Flanders far more quickly and in far larger numbers than through the narrow and intricate defiles of the Ardennes. With its flanks guarded by Antwerp and Namur, an allied army might have carried out defensive operations on the Gette more successfully than anywhere else. In a proclamation issued on August 7th, he explained to his men the part which they had to play: "Soldiers of the Belgian Army, do not forget that you are the advanced-guard of an immense host and that we only await the arrival of our French brothers to march to victory."

(4) The King resided in the Castle of Corbeek-Loo, a few miles east of Louvain, and divided his time between General Headquarters and a series of inspections. When at Headquarters, he gave audience to a number of French officers and Belgian public men, and exercised a strict supervision on the orders sent to the troops. His control was not only nominal but truly effective. Without any dramatic gesture he had definitely established his authority.

During his visits to the troops he noticed some improvement, especially from the point of view of organization and discipline, but the conclusions he had previously formed remained unchanged. They were confirmed by General Bertrand and other officers of the 3rd Division who had taken part in the Liège operations: "In its present state the Army should be employed defensively."

During this anxious period of waiting, news reached Headquarters almost daily from Liège. The forts continued to hold up the enemy and to hamper his movements, but the Germans had brought up their heavy guns and mortars which smashed the cupolas and destroyed the most powerful concrete works. Following the heavy bombardments of General von Finem's batteries, the fort of Barchon fell on the 8th, Evgnée on the 11th, Pontisse, Embourg and Chaudfontaine on the 13th, Liers and Fléron on the 14th, Boncelles and Lantain on the 15th, Hollogne and Flémalle on the 16th.

Loncin, which occupied a key position, and where General Leman was in command, was subjected to a five days' bombardment. Up to the 15th at noon, its guns were able to answer the enemy's fire, but in the afternoon of the same day a 16½-inch shell exploded in the powder magazine. Most of the defenders were burned or crushed under the wreckage. Leman was picked up unconscious by the enemy. Before leaving for Germany on August 16th, he sent the King a letter in which he explained that the forts had not been built to resist the fire of the heavy artillery brought against them. "I am sure," he concluded, "that I upheld the honour of our arms by surrendering neither the fortress nor the forts. Deign to forgive, Sire, the untidiness of this letter. I am very much shaken physically by the explosion of Loncin. In Germany, where I am being sent, my thoughts will be where they always have been, with Belgium and her King. I would willingly have given my life the better to serve them, but Death would not have me."

More than three years later, General Leman received, in Switzerland, the answer of his "very affectionate" King: "I wish with all my heart that your health, so precious to us, will be restored, so that when later you go back to our liberated country, you will be able to render further eminent service, thanks to the high moral position which you occupy in the nation's esteem. By resolutely

En vous enfermant résolument  
dans le fort de Loncon, lors de  
l'attaque de Liège en août 1914,  
vous avez donné un grand  
exemple.

L'acte héroïque posé ainsi par un chef  
n'est jamais perdu, mais forme  
la tradition du sacrifice, accroît la force  
du sentiment patriotique, reste la  
plus haute manifestation du devoir  
de celui qui commande :

Mon cher Général, je vous exprime  
l'admiration que m'inspire votre  
intomptable énergie et je vous prie  
de me croire toujours

Votre très affectueux

Albert

5. Extract from a letter addressed by King Albert to General Leman in 1917.

(*By kind permission of Mademoiselle Leman*)

remaining in the fort of Loncin at the time of the attack on Liège, in August 1914, you have given a great example. An act of heroism performed by a leader is never lost; it establishes a tradition of sacrifice, increases the strength of patriotic feeling and remains the highest manifestation of the Commander's duty.”<sup>1</sup>

A deep friendship had grown up between the young King and the old General, who had been one of his teachers at the *Ecole Militaire*, and had only given up his professorship at the instance of M. de Broqueville to assume command of the 3rd Division, in January 1914. Like his King, General Leman was essentially a student; like him also he possessed reserves of energy and determination which allowed him, under pressing circumstances, to leave his study for the battlefield. When he accepted his new post, he realized its importance and its peril. After following the manœuvre of the 3rd Division, two months before the outbreak of the War, the Sovereign had paid a glowing homage to Leman before his officers: “I will not say that your General left without regret a School to which he had devoted the greater part of his life, but he left it like a disciplined soldier, a man in whom the sense of duty is so highly developed that it overrides all personal preferences.”

To most people duty appears as a negative virtue; it consists in doing what you are paid to do, or what you have promised to do, nothing less and nothing more. There is a stale duty as there is a stale truth, a truth which is merely the opposite to a lie. People succeed in leading the most miserable and uninspiring kind of life, persuading themselves that they remain dutiful and sincere. They forget that, taken in a positive sense, the only living sense, these simple virtues are the most exacting which human philosophy and religion could conceive. The fiercest energy, the highest heroism, can scarcely satisfy them, for they rise in proportion to the character of the man who devotes himself to them. The greater the man, the greater the

<sup>1</sup> See plate 5.

duty, the longer the list of obligations which must be fulfilled. They led General Leman under the wreckage of Loncin and King Albert into the trenches of the Yser.

There are few documents more valuable than the King's greeting to the General after his long captivity: "A heroic action remains the highest manifestation of the Commander's duty." These words, welding heroism and duty into one glowing flame, are written in a careful, almost childlike hand. The King's writing had scarcely changed since the days of his boyhood when he reluctantly applied himself to his indoor task instead of joining his sisters at play in the garden.<sup>1</sup>

### (C) *Louvain*

(1) On August 9th, King Albert received an extraordinary communication from the German Government. It had reached the Belgian Prime Minister through the medium of Holland, the American Minister in Brussels having refused to handle it. After praising the gallant defence of Liège and the "heroic resistance of the Belgian Army against vastly superior numbers," the German Government begged the King "to spare Belgium further horrors of war" and declared that it was ready "to meet Belgium in any way consistent with its action against France." Germany regretted that she had been compelled by circumstances "to take the great decision to enter Belgium and to occupy Liège as a base for further operations." She protested that she had no intention "of acquiring possession of Belgian territory," and that she was ready to evacuate the country as soon as military conditions would allow her to do so.

This diplomatic overture was in conformity with the attitude adopted from the first by the German authorities. They had not formally declared war upon Belgium and had

<sup>1</sup> See plate 15.

urged the Belgian Minister to remain in Berlin, as there might arise further questions to be discussed between the two Governments.<sup>1</sup> The old belief that Belgium would offer no serious resistance was hard to kill. Even after suffering heavy losses before Liège, the Germans clung to the idea that King Albert's ultimate decision might be determined by the "force of circumstances." They speculated on the slow movements of the Allied forces, on the anxiety of the Belgian civil population and no doubt also on the impression caused by the policy of terrorism consistently pursued by their armies since they had crossed the Belgian frontier. Every check inflicted on them by the forts round Liège had been sorely avenged on the unarmed and helpless inhabitants of the district. News of these excesses had reached Brussels, and the King understood only too well what the German Government meant by "further horrors of war." Aware of his devotion to his people, the enemy realized how anxious he must have been to limit the area of massacre and devastation. Belgium had "maintained the honour of her arms" and might easily have claimed that, since her guarantors were unable to support her in time, she found herself unable to prolong the struggle.

King Albert, whose time was fully employed, did not even summon a Cabinet meeting. He turned down the peace overture, leaving his Prime Minister to draft the answer which was immediately communicated to Paris and London:

*The proposal of the German Government is a repetition of that made to us in the ultimatum of August 2nd. Faithful to her international obligations, Belgium can only repeat her reply to that ultimatum for the reason that, since August 3rd, her neutrality has been violated, a cruel war has been waged on her territory, and the guarantors of her neutrality have loyally and at once responded to her appeal."*

<sup>1</sup> See p. 36.

This decision to hold out to the end was in full accordance with the plans made by the King and his military adviser several months before the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Meanwhile the information which was reaching Headquarters from the invaded parts of Belgian territory showed that the Germans were attacking in great strength, not only south, but also north of the Meuse, that the inroads of their cavalry might at any moment threaten the army's communications with Antwerp, and that a retirement might become urgent. Since no definite news of the progress of the Allies could be obtained, King Albert wished to make his position clear to the French and British authorities. Speaking to the two Military Attachés, he explained to them that he could only rely on his Field Army for the present, and that if he were faced by superior forces he might find it necessary to withdraw under protection of the Antwerp forts, "with the intention of resuming the offensive when the approach of the Allied armies would make its influence felt."

This formal declaration was prompted by a visit paid to Headquarters, on August 9th, by M. Berthelot. The French Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs had informed the Sovereign of the rumour widely spread in France, at the time, according to which Belgium was prepared to conclude an armistice with Germany. He had been instructed to explain that France would do everything possible to help Belgium, but that "her concentration could not be interfered with." The King had reassured the French emissary with regard to his intention to fight to a finish, adding that, if necessary, "he would himself shoulder a rifle." Fearing that the offensive plans of French Headquarters might prove disastrous, he further declared that he had never doubted France's intentions and that his only apprehension was that she would show "too great a zeal before all her forces were ready."

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 149.

On August 11th, the President of the Republic sent a reply to this communication stating that the moment was approaching when the French Army would be in a position to go forward and when the Belgian forces could usefully co-operate with it. In his answer the King repeated the warning he had given two days before to the two Military Attachés: "The French Army can completely rely on the co-operation of the Belgian Army . . . up to the limit of its strength and remaining resources, provided only that its communications with the base of Antwerp, where all its reserve of food and munitions are collected, are not thereby exposed to the risk of being cut off by large enemy forces."

This cautious attitude was fully justified. The number of corps identified in the provinces of Liège and Limburg steadily increased. Strong cavalry columns supported by infantry and artillery were signalled moving in the direction of Diest. In order to check this movement which threatened the army's communications with Antwerp, a brigade of the 1st Division was sent, on August 12th, to reinforce the Cavalry Division under General de Witte, which had taken up a position on the Gette in front of the village of Haelen. The action which followed was entirely successful, but the infantry was too exhausted to follow up their advantage.

(3) The immediate result of this success was to strengthen the influence of the partisans of an offensive at Headquarters. The same impatient optimism pervaded Belgian public opinion and the Belgian Press. The wildest reports were circulated in Brussels: the German Army was already demoralized and on the brink of starvation; the forts of Liège were still intact; the Capital was absolutely safe and would be protected by the Allied armies which were to be expected at any moment; there were 40,000 (instead of 18,000) volunteers in training.

The King considered that it was high time to explain the situation to his Government in order to bridle this dangerous enthusiasm. On August 14th, he sent a detailed

note to the Prime Minister, in which he stated that it was absolutely impossible for him to assume the offensive owing to the heavy losses incurred by the 3rd Division, and to the small number left at his disposal (about 90,000 able men). He dispelled the cloud of illusions regarding early support from the Allies; the Belgians were alone, and must remain alone for a considerable time. Under these circumstances it was essential for the army to maintain her communications with Antwerp. "It is quite possible," he added, "that the Germans will overrun Central Belgium and occupy Brussels. The greatest victory during this period will be to have gained time; the final issue of events is still uncertain."<sup>1</sup>

The situation at Headquarters was made particularly difficult on account of the divergent views of the Commander-in-Chief and the French officers attached to his Staff. The latter received all the news which reached Belgian Headquarters, and which proved that large bodies of troops were crossing the Meuse at various points, from Visé to Huy. But they either ignored or distrusted this valuable information, sent by a number of patriotic railwaymen, telegraphists and officials from the occupied part of the country, and adopted the conclusions of French Headquarters, according to which the German cavalry forces, north of the Meuse, were merely a screen covering the movements of the main body of the German Army. They were convinced that the expectant attitude of the Belgians was not justified, and persisted in urging a flank attack on the German forces south of the Meuse.

These criticisms did not modify the King's appreciation of the situation. On August 17th, he fully agreed with M. de Broqueville that the seat of the Government should be transferred to Antwerp and that the Queen and her children should leave the same day for the national stronghold.

On the 18th, in the morning, messages began to pour

<sup>1</sup> Galet, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

into Headquarters from the various divisions, cavalry reconnaissances and Belgian informers, showing that large bodies of troops amounting at least to 500,000 men were converging on the position of the Gette, from the East and from the South. At about noon, the King thought that retreat could no longer be postponed, but owing to lack of news, he was torn between his wish to save the army from a hopeless struggle and his anxiety not to abandon the advantageous position which he occupied, at the very moment when French reinforcements might allow him to withstand the enemy and to save half the country from invasion. After some uncertainty, he definitely decided at 8 p.m. that the whole army should withdraw early the next day to the line of the Dyle. The 1st Division had been engaged at Hautem-Sainte-Marguerite against far superior forces and had lost 1600 men and 30 officers. The King was deeply affected by this news which could only strengthen his conviction that any further hesitation would prove disastrous.<sup>1</sup>

All uncertainty which might still have lingered in the King's mind was dispelled, the same evening, by definite information sent by General Joffre. This showed that the British Army could not reach Louvain, in the most favourable circumstances, before the 25th, and that it was impossible for any strong body of French troops to co-operate with the Belgians much before the same date. A delay of seven hours might have proved fatal, a delay of seven days was simply unthinkable.

The Sovereign's decision to retire did not, however, pass unchallenged. On the following day, the Chief of the General Staff received a letter from Colonel Aldebert, the head of the French Mission, protesting against an order which, by uncovering Brussels, opened the country to the "raids of the German cavalry" and "exposed, without any warning from Belgian Headquarters, the left of the French Army." General de Selliers was instructed to answer that

<sup>1</sup> See sketch I

France had already derived certain advantages from "the resistance of the fortified position of Liège, the breaking-up of two divisions of cavalry, a delay of twelve days caused to the German thrust across Belgium, and the support given to the French left wing by the fortified position of Namur." The Chief of Staff pointed out that, when taking their position on the Gette, the Belgians "had hoped for direct and early help from French and British forces," and that they were not in a position to resist any longer the superior forces which were attacking them.

It must be added that the French Government and General Joffre himself readily recognized the wisdom of the King's decision and paid a handsome tribute to Belgian resistance "which enabled France to complete her concentration, and gave time to the British to take up their position on the French left." Colonel Aldebert was relieved of his post and given an active command.

M. Klobukowski was instructed, on the next day, to convey to the Sovereign the thanks of France for the great services rendered by the Belgian Army; he expressed the wish that the present retirement would only be temporary and would be followed by a counter-attack against the enemy's right flank. In his answer, King Albert pointed out that, by remaining in its former position the army ran the risk of being cut off from Antwerp and completely surrounded. He reminded the French Minister of his heavy losses, 20,000 men at Liège, 1600 at Hautem-Sainte-Marguerite. He assured him that he would resume the offensive as soon as possible: "It is not a question of shutting ourselves up in an entrenched camp, but of taking breath before an eventual counterblow."

The whole controversy between the Commander-in-Chief and Colonel Aldebert centred round the estimates of the German forces marching through central Belgium. We know now, through the publication of the German Memoirs, that on the 18th and 19th of August, the Belgians were in contact with no less than four army corps and one

cavalry division of the German First Army commanded by von Kluck (in all 160,000 men), and that this General was ordered to "destroy the Belgian Army and cut it off from Antwerp." In his account of these events, von Kluck expressed his disappointment at not being able to carry out his instructions owing to the fact that, "while opposing a stubborn resistance, the Belgians always retired at the right moment."

(4) This first fortnight was perhaps the most trying experience which the King suffered during the campaign. The retreat from Antwerp was no doubt more critical and the Battle of the Yser more tragic, but contact between the Commander-in-Chief and his men had, by then, been established. He could rely on them as they relied on him. The days of Louvain were days of doubt and misgivings. The King was placed at the head of a vanguard and waited vainly for reinforcements. He had to deal with untrained soldiers who, in spite of their high morale, were not properly organized for the offensive and for a war of manœuvre. He was worried with divisions at Headquarters, over-excitement in Brussels, and criticisms from the French Mission. Young and inexperienced, he had to resist advice and suggestions, based on prejudice and inadequate information. He remained quiet and composed throughout.

At the time of the Battle of Haelen, his Chief and Sub-Chief of Staff brought him a message from the 1st Division announcing disaster: the Cavalry Division had been cut to pieces and the two infantry regiments were retiring in disorder; they wished to know whether reinforcements should not be rushed at once to Haelen. The King, who was dining at the Burgomaster's house at Louvain, read the message with the greatest calm and quietly remarked that, since the Commander of the 1st Division was a long way from the scene of action, the best course to follow before sending any orders would be to await the report of those who had taken part in the fighting.

That report reached him three hours later: it announced a complete victory.

In his speech to Parliament, on August 4th, King Albert had advised his compatriots to face their ordeal with "cool courage." He was not fond of preaching what he could not practise, and he knew that the greatest energy might be wasted unless it remained under perfect control. One imagines him walking through the picturesque Louvain of pre-War days, stopping now and then to give instructions or to answer some anxious inquiry, standing head and shoulders above those who surrounded him, speaking always with perfect composure, while the country throbbed with excitement, scarcely raising his hand when the whole nation was thirsting for dramatic gestures, bending his head slightly in a listening attitude when cries of joy and fear were filling the air, understanding everything, foreseeing everything—a tower of strength, a lighthouse in a stormy night.

(D) *Antwerp*

(1) In Antwerp, where the army retired in good order, the King found Queen Elisabeth and her children waiting for him in the Palace. The Queen had been kept informed by Commandant Galet of the initial successes at Liège, and followed with anxiety the progress of the German Army through the country. She had begun her daily rounds, visiting the wounded, helping the doctors in military hospitals and relieving as much as possible the distress of thousands of civilians who had sought refuge within the entrenched camp. Not for one moment did she allow her old loyalty to her native land to damp her zeal for the cause of her new country. According to her own words, "a curtain of iron" had been lowered between Germany and herself.<sup>1</sup> She felt the betrayal of which her husband had been an innocent victim all the more bitterly in that some

<sup>1</sup> Reported by Pierre Loti (des Ombiaux: *La Reine Elisabeth.*)

of her own kinsmen were among the leaders of the invasion. Hers was not a divided allegiance. She was and remained Belgian, and she devoted to the national cause all her thoughts and energy. She brought to the King the comfort of her presence and of her indomitable cheerfulness and henceforth stood at his side, sharing his dangers, his disappointments, his hopes and his final triumph. A Zeppelin raid, a few days later, was only the first of a long series of war experiences which she endured with perfect equanimity.

Ten bombs were dropped on the town, some close to the Palace, claiming a number of victims. King George was "horrified" at the news and showed his serious concern for the safety of the Royal Family. Lord Curzon, at the same time, pressed the Queen to accept his hospitality. It was finally decided that the Princes and the Princess should be brought to England, but Queen Elisabeth only consented to depart on condition that she should return at once, for she did not wish to remain separated from the King when a severe crisis was threatening. She left on August 31st, on a Belgian steamer escorted by a British destroyer, and was again in Antwerp on September 7th.

As soon as King Albert settled in his new Headquarters, he consulted the Governor of the City on the resources of the fortress. The latter was occupied by 60,000 men, divided almost equally between the artillery manning the forts, and the garrison troops. The General declared that Antwerp could not for long resist a heavy bombardment such as that which had shattered the defences of Liège, and that the place was insufficiently provided with ammunition to stand a long siege. He also insisted on the necessity of using the whole of the Field Army to defend efficiently the intervals between the forts which extended over sixty miles. On the other hand, some members of the Government now in Antwerp and a few influential officers had only reluctantly accepted the decision of August 18th and were urging the Commander-in-Chief to attack the German Army in the rear.

King Albert was thus, for the second time, confronted with the alternative of adopting a purely defensive attitude, reserving all his forces for a possible siege, or of launching into dangerous and costly ventures which might further reduce the small army under his command. In spite of the pressure brought to bear upon him, he remained faithful to the policy already adopted on the Gette, which was the only one consistent with the position he occupied and the forces at his disposal. He refused to risk in bold attacks some of his best units which might be cut off from the Antwerp base, but he decided, at the same time, to fulfil his promise to the Allies to co-operate with them to the end. He knew that, in doing this, he would bring upon himself the enemy's retribution, and that the Germans could not tolerate for long a direct threat to their lines of communication, but his loyalty prevented him from dissociating Belgian interests from the common cause. Thus, while some excitable patriots were accusing him of timidity, he was deliberately working for the closer solidarity of the Allied armies.

(2) An opportunity was soon to occur. On hearing that the French and British forces were moving forward along the Mons-Namur line and would, very likely, be heavily engaged on August 24th, the King organized a sortie of the whole of the Field Army on the same day. Taking Malines as his advance Headquarters, he launched an attack on the centre of the German forces placed before the entrenched camp. At first the operation developed satisfactorily and the King even hoped to reach Brussels, but the enemy was soon able to bring up reinforcements, and since the Allies, on their side, had failed to check the invader's progress, the order to retire had to be given after two days' fighting.

The Belgians had lost 3000 men, but their action had been most valuable in compelling the enemy to increase their forces before Antwerp from two and a half to six

divisions, and in thus lightening the weight of the German onslaught during the desperate Battle of the Frontiers.

The sortie showed some deficiencies in the Belgian fighting forces which had not been able fully to deploy at the appointed time and which were insufficiently supported by artillery. Throughout the sortie, the King moved along the line of attack, encouraging the soldiers by his presence and rewarding their gallantry on the field. He exposed himself by following the operations from the tower of Malines Cathedral while the town was being heavily bombarded. It was already his opinion that even senior leaders should keep close to their troops in order to appreciate personally their attitude under fire and to correct at once any mistake which might bring upon them unnecessary danger or jeopardize their efforts. He did not spare himself, but no general was more sparing of his men. His policy was to obtain the maximum of military results with the minimum of losses, and he never rejoiced over a success if it had been bought at too high a price.

His soldiers were not slow to recognize this quality in their young leader. They learnt to trust him implicitly, and to appreciate the wisdom of his decisions. It was during the sorties from Antwerp that the first links were forged of the strong chain of loyalty which was to hold the Belgian forces together during the retreat to the sea and the last stand on the Yser.

(3) While the bulk of the Belgian Army was making its influence felt between Antwerp and Brussels, the garrison of Namur was waging its last fight on the extreme right of the Franco-British forces struggling through the Battle of the Frontiers. It included 19,000 men belonging to the garrison, strengthened by the 17,000 men of the 4th Division under General Michel. The fortress was gradually being surrounded by the whole army of von Gallwitz, 120,000 strong, bringing with it the heavy Austrian .

howitzers from Skoda against which no modern fort could possibly hold its own.

From August 19th, connection had been severed between Namur and the rest of the Belgian Army, but messages reached Antwerp by wireless and carrier pigeons. By these means the King heard, on the 21st, that the eastern sector of the forts had been heavily attacked and that the French had not yet reached the town. During the following day, in spite of heavy bombardment, the resistance was maintained and three French battalions joined the Belgian forces, but on the morning of the 23rd, an ominous message announced that two of the eastern forts had been wrecked, the field artillery destroyed, and the first line works flattened out; French support was growing weaker in the West.

The Germans were evidently not going to repeat in Namur the mistake they had made at Liège by launching an unprepared attack and exposing their troops to the fire from the forts. The latter were pounded to pieces by the fire of long-range guns to which they were unable to reply, and the army only undertook the assault the next morning, after the most thorough artillery preparations. A message received in the afternoon announced the fall of the town.

This news caused deep disappointment and some sharp criticisms at Headquarters, but the King realized that General Michel could not be held responsible for the superiority of the enemy's artillery and for the lack of efficient support from the French. We know now, that at the time when General Franchet d'Espèrey was preparing an advance on the Sambre to relieve the town, he heard that the Germans had crossed the Meuse at Dinant and were threatening his communications. He immediately gave up all idea of attack and was soon involved in the general retreat of the French Fifth Army.<sup>1</sup> The remainder of the 4th Belgian Division, numbering 12,000 men, had a miraculous escape from Namur. After a perilous journey, it reached the French coast and was brought by sea to

<sup>1</sup> *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. III, p. 116.

Ostend. From August 25th, it again co-operated with the main body of the Belgian Army. General Michel retained his command, and served with distinction throughout the War.

(4) It is impossible to realize the bitter anxiety which weighed upon the King's mind during these days without alluding to a particularly painful subject: the grave excesses committed by the German troops during the first stage of the invasion of Belgium. The fact that the Belgians themselves prefer not to revive these cruel memories, while the Germans persistently deny the charges laid against their Army, has led many people to think that the so-called "atrocities" were fictitious, or that war propaganda grossly exaggerated punitive measures which might have been justified by civil resistance. King Albert knew only too well that the news which reached him in August 1914 was founded on fact, and that his people were bearing the consequences of his decision. The official reports drawn up at the time by the Belgian authorities were not merely based on the declarations of frightened and irresponsible refugees. The lawyers who were in charge of that work did not lightly accept all statements made to them, and the patient inquiry undertaken since the War by trained historians, has on the whole confirmed their findings. In several cases the first estimates of the losses have been found to be too low.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that terrorism was deliberately used, if not by the civil authorities, at least by German Headquarters, to intimidate first King Albert and his Government, and later the population of the occupied country. A strong hint had been given to the Sovereign in the proposals made by Germany on August 9th. He had been urged "to spare Belgium the horrors of war," and the punitive measures taken in the Liège district up to that

<sup>1</sup> Cuvelier in *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. II.

Chanoine Schmitz et Dom Nieuwland: *L'Invasion allemande dans les provinces de Namur et de Luxembourg*.

day, notably at Warsage, Sprimont, Battice, Louveigné and Herve, showed plainly that he could no longer rely on the strict observance of the laws of war, as defined by the Hague Conventions.<sup>1</sup> From the 12th of August, after the Belgian Government had delivered their negative reply, excesses were resumed and the threat contained in the second ultimatum was at once carried into effect in the burning and massacres which occurred among other places, at Hermée on the 14th, at Visé and Wandre on the 15th, and at Haccourt on the 18th.

As far as the troops themselves were concerned, the main reason for the excesses seems to have been the fear of the *francs-tireurs*, fostered among the German population and the soldiers by the wild reports of the Press and by the speeches of some officers: "In a country so densely populated as Belgium," writes Henri Pirenne, "military operations could not develop without causing particularly severe catastrophes which would necessarily be inflicted on the civil population. Nevertheless, the massacres and destructions were far greater in number and gravity than might have been expected. Until the fall of Antwerp they were practically the order of the day. A large number occurred behind the lines, far from the theatre of operations, and cannot be attributed to the excitement of the troops or to military necessities. Their principal if not their only cause must be sought in the dread of the *francs-tireurs* which haunted the mind of the German armies. The conduct of such admirably disciplined troops can only be explained by a kind of auto-suggestion. The unexpected resistance which they had encountered must have further shaken their self-control. If the small Belgian Army dared to oppose them, was it not because it relied on the complicity of the civil population? . . . During the first days, it is not only possible, but even probable, that an exasperated civilian unloaded his sporting rifle on some soldiers from a loft or from behind a hedge. But how many times did

<sup>1</sup> See p. 168.

not a chance shot, the bursting of a tyre, or the flight of a peasant challenged by a sentry, provoke a panic immediately followed by the shooting at random of men, women and children? Even where a supposed *franc-tireur* had been caught, was not the punishment out of all proportion with the crime? . . . Every village in which such an occurrence took place had to deliver hostages and suffer executions and arson. . . . Such cruel measures would evidently have stopped at once the resistance of a population which was entirely left to the mercy of the victor by the retreat of the national army. Nevertheless, far from declining, terrorism increased with the progress of the invasion. From the middle of August every civilian was suspected. Every village whence shots had been fired by the rear-guard of the regular army, every place where a bridge had been destroyed, a railway cut, a telegraph damaged, was considered responsible. Along the firing line, the German troops obliged the inhabitants to walk in front of them, making a living screen of their bodies. The burgomasters and especially the curés of the countryside were everywhere suspected of inciting the population. They were summarily sentenced in a neighbouring field and condemned to death. The number of priests shot in the dioceses of Liège, Tournai, Namur and Malines is estimated at least at forty-three. . . . The villages in which these events occurred were still placarded with the proclamation issued by the Belgian Government forbidding civilians to take the least part in the military operations; the inhabitants had brought their weapons to the Town Hall. Nothing could dispel a prejudice denied by all evidence but accepted implicitly by the complex of war. As the cases of devastation and shooting grew in number, the contagion spread further. The troops who crossed burning localities believed that their comrades must have been attacked; the evidence of punishment was a sufficient proof of the crime. If arson had taken place the civilians must have fired on the troops. The soldiers felt worried and exasperated among a people whom they

deemed capable of the worst treason, and it is not to be wondered that the further they advanced in the country, the worse grew their ferocity and the terrible consequences which it provoked. The last catastrophes caused by this state of mind left far behind those which occurred before."<sup>1</sup>

Each of them took place in connection with some military operation, the German soldiers avenging themselves upon unarmed civilians for the losses they had suffered during a recent fight with the regular army. The worst of these events all occurred within ten days.

The massacres at Aerschot, where 150 civilians lost their lives, began on August 19th, after a rear-guard action fought by the Belgian troops retiring on Antwerp. The burning of Andenne, on the next day, with its death-roll of 211 victims, was an episode of the German operations against Namur and followed the destruction of the bridge over the Meuse by Belgian military engineers. The sack of Tamines is connected with the Battle of the Frontiers; here 384 civilians paid, on August 22nd, for the resistance of the French troops which occupied the town. History repeated itself at Dinant where, on the next day, 665 men, women and children were executed by the soldiery. As for the destruction of Louvain, with its library and historical buildings, which started on the 25th and lasted for nearly a week, it must be considered as the direct consequence of the first sortie from Antwerp which caused a panic among German *landwehr* troops recently arrived from Liège.<sup>2</sup>

This was by no means the end of the ordeal to which the Belgian population was subjected. After Louvain, the Terror, following in the wake of the advancing armies, spread to the sparsely populated provinces of Namur and Luxemburg. The total number of men, women and children killed during the first month of the invasion reaches 5000. In almost every case the German soldiers,

<sup>1</sup> Henri Pirenne: *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Armée allemande à l'oeuvre et le Livre Blanc* "n.d."

infuriated by the losses inflicted upon them by the regular army and hypnotized by the dread of the *francs-tireurs*, were prompted in their action by a kind of furious panic. Whatever can be said to explain or even to attenuate the crimes of the soldiery, the German Command remains largely responsible. However nervous the privates might have grown, their officers should have been able to control them; and there is evidence that some of them succeeded in doing so.<sup>1</sup>

We know, on the other hand, that some superior officers relied on the moral effect of the massacres on the population. General von Bülow himself had placards posted on the walls of Liège, as early as August 22nd, announcing that it was "with his consent that Andenne was burned and about 100 civilians shot."<sup>2</sup> The blame was once more put on the phantom *francs-tireurs*, but it is scarcely possible to imagine that superior officers credited this legend as blindly as their troops. More or less deliberately, some of them used this convenient means of crushing beforehand any attempt at resistance on the part of the civilians, in their fanatical belief that the possible loss of one German soldier justified the sacrifice of a hundred Belgian lives. Andenne lay conveniently close to Liège, Tamines to Namur, and Louvain to Brussels. Let the big towns beware of the fate of the little ones.

While on the whole our knowledge of the facts remains what it was in 1914, these events have grown sufficiently remote to allow us to appreciate them in their true light and not to exaggerate the element of premeditation.

(5) The insistence with which Belgian statesmen protested at the time against these violations of the laws of

<sup>1</sup> As, for instance, Major Bassewitz who, following a panic which caused two deaths at Huy, on August 20th, issued a proclamation forbidding the soldiers to use their arms unless ordered to do so by an officer: "Owing to the troops' deplorable conduct, a non-commissioned officer and a soldier have been gravely wounded by German ammunitions." (Cuvelier, *op. cit.*, p. 77.)

<sup>2</sup> H. Davignon *German Posters*.

war may be misunderstood to-day. Owing to the necessity of retaliation as the struggle developed, both sides were obliged to ignore, in many cases, the elaborate clauses of the Hague Conventions and during the post-War period the activity of Statesmen has been more engaged on preventing international conflicts than on attenuating their effects. In 1914, however, the Hague Conventions stood more or less in the same light as that in which the Covenant of the League of Nations stands to-day, and one of their principal aims was precisely to shelter civilians against the excesses of invading armies. Besides, as a neutral country, Belgium occupied a privileged position. She was protected by the treaties against any violation of her national territory, and by the Hague Conventions against any arbitrary measure taken against her population. She could not even be considered as a belligerent, since she was merely fulfilling her international obligations by opposing the passage of foreign troops through her territory.

The wholesale burning and ransacking of open towns, the attacks on the lives and property of thousands of citizens surpassing all similar excesses committed in Western Europe for over a century, were therefore bound to stir up in Belgium and abroad a bitterness of feeling which cannot easily be gauged. King Albert must have felt himself subjected in Antwerp to a kind of blackmail, since every check inflicted by his troops on the progress of the invader was followed by reprisals on defenceless civilians. It seemed as if any initiative taken by the Belgian Army must provoke fresh devastations.

The effect of German terrorism was rendered still more evident to the King by the emigration of part of the civil population. The news of the excesses committed around Liège did not spread at once throughout the country, but the tragedies of Aerschot and Louvain which took place close to Antwerp and Brussels provoked a regular panic. From August 20th, all the roads leading from the centre of the country towards Antwerp and the sea were encumbered

with fugitives. A large part of the population of Louvain and Malines fled before the advancing armies. By the beginning of October, the exodus reached still greater proportions. Nearly one million people sought refuge in Holland; the rest joined the holiday-makers who were crowding the seaside resorts; 250,000 of them found hospitality in the British Isles, over 100,000 went to France. Practically 1,500,000, or 20 per cent. of the population, left Belgian territory.

As a man of honour, King Albert was bound to feel that, in this unequal fight, his adversary was adding foul play to treachery and violence. Not only had he endeavoured to lure him into a state of false confidence, while he was preparing the violation of Belgian neutrality, but he was now trying to exploit terrorism in order to paralyse the activity of the army. Could not Germany be satisfied with waging war against the Belgian soldiers in flagrant violation of sacred treaties? Was she now to extend her doctrine of military necessity to the burning of undefended towns and to the murder of peaceful citizens?

His resolution was unshaken, but he was prepared for the worst. After the news from Louvain he was heard to say: "They will destroy Brussels."<sup>1</sup>

(6) It may well be asked why the Germans did not proceed to deal with Antwerp as they had done with Liège and Namur and allowed the Belgian forces, on more than one occasion, to threaten their communications. It must not be forgotten that the Schlieffen Plan did not allow them to waste time or troops on secondary operations which did not bear directly on their main attack, sweeping through northern France towards Paris. They underrated the value and the spirit of the Belgian Army and thought that it would be enough to throw a screen of reserve troops in front of Antwerp to check any danger from that quarter. They had, nevertheless, been disturbed by the first sortie,

<sup>1</sup> L. de Lichtervelde in *Rex*, February 1935.

and lived under the apprehension that the French and the British might at any time send reinforcements to Antwerp and even organize an attack on their right flank in Flanders.

As a matter of fact, the line of the Scheldt was only lightly held by small Belgian units in Termonde and Ghent. The problem of Antwerp's communication with the coast was one of the King's main preoccupations. The only railway the Belgians could use ran to Ostend via St. Nicolas and Bruges, and was protected by the line of the Scheldt and of its tributary the Durme. The necessity of holding this line was rendered more evident by a successful operation of the German forces on Termonde, on September 4th. Reinforcements were at once rushed to the Durme, which was flooded; and the 1st Division was detailed to guard the railway to Ostend in co-operation with the Ghent and Termonde units.

The news from French Headquarters was bad. In those dark days of September, people had ceased to believe in the value of "strategical retreats." A wave of discouragement swept over Belgium and France, and those who had been most optimistic a month before were now the first to lose heart. The King, however, found some ground for hope in the situation. In a conversation with M. Klobukowski on September 5th, he insisted that, in face of such a well-organized enemy, the Allies had to "hang on and fight," knowing that time was on their side: "Germany could only succeed if she were not hindered in her onslaught. Her plan was dislocated from the very beginning. The campaign has now been going on for a month and in no quarter have the Franco-British Armies been broken and pierced. It is the rock upon which the impetus of the German Army will exhaust itself—an impetus decreasing day by day, because that army is moving farther and farther from its base, because it is obliged to guard longer and longer communications, and because it is threatened in the rear by an enemy (the Belgians) whose progress can only be delayed by immobilizing important units."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs de Belgique.*

These remarks, based on scant information, were made in Antwerp a few hours before the French Government had left Paris and six days before General Joffre succeeded at last in repulsing the enemy.

It was when the hope of victory was at its lowest ebb that the King, on his own initiative, planned a second sortie from Antwerp in order that this diversion might help the Allies in France.

On September 7th, information reached Headquarters showing that the Germans were rushing their troops towards the South and that the forces screening Antwerp had recently been reduced, particularly towards Aerschot. A raid on the Cologne-Liège-Brussels railway had become possible, but the King was averse to a mere *coup-de-main* which implied considerable risk if delivered by a small force. Besides, his main purpose was to detain in Belgium part of the reinforcements which were being sent to France. He therefore planned with the greatest secrecy an attack by his five divisions, on a wide front, threatening Brussels, but with the main purpose of destroying the railway between Louvain and Tirlemont. The action began on September 9th and developed successfully during the following two days. Cavalry units succeeded in blowing up the railway east of Louvain. The advance was slower in the West, but the Germans were obliged to retire all along the line.<sup>1</sup>

On the 10th, the King received news of the Battle of the Marne, and was asked to facilitate French operations by attacking the German communications. This could only confirm him in the wisdom of his well-timed decision and in his intention to press the offensive home.

Hearing that the 2nd Division had suffered a severe check through a German counter-attack, King Albert hastened to impress upon his general the urgent necessity of pursuing the offensive. He wished also to ascertain whether

<sup>1</sup> See *infra* II.

the troops were in a fit condition to resume the fight. This was characteristic of his methods. As soon as he could leave General Headquarters, he made a point of visiting the sectors of the battlefield where his presence might be required, either to raise the confidence of some discouraged units or to reward the successful efforts of others. He always preferred to see things for himself and to speak to the officers concerned. On critical occasions he instinctively distrusted second-hand reports and disliked sending messages when he could deliver them himself.

By the 12th, the Belgian troops had reached the limit of their endurance, and had the greatest difficulty in holding their own against powerful German counter-attacks. In the light of the favourable news received from France, the King decided nevertheless that a further effort should be made. According to his instructions, "the successes gained by the Franco-British Armies imposed upon the Belgians the duty of co-operating to the full extent of their powers to promote the final victory by compelling the enemy to bring the maximum of force against them." The troops remained on the defensive during the early morning of the next day, and the order to retire upon Antwerp was only issued when their condition made it imperative.

This second sortie was far more successful than the first and showed that the fighting qualities of soldiers and officers had greatly improved. The Belgians had lost 8000 men, but their action had caused the counter-march of the 9th Reserve Corps, on its way to France, and the maintenance on the Belgian front of the whole of the 6th Reserve Division with various marine and *landwehr* reinforcements. We know from German sources that the Staff was worried during the whole Battle of the Marne by the news received from Belgium, and that orders and counter-orders were sent to various important units, owing to the apprehension caused at Headquarters by the presence, in the rear of the German Army, of a determined enemy who succeeded at a most critical moment in severing for a

time its main line of communication. The contribution of the Belgian Army to the victory of the Marne must not be judged only by the number of troops retained in front of Antwerp or by the delays suffered by some German units on their way to the main theatre of operations. The second sortie had a very considerably moral effect, and the co-operation of the Belgian divisions proved far more valuable in the advantageous position which they occupied than it would have been on the French front. The result of this action amply justifies the resolution, taken by the King on August 18th, to retire from the Gette on Antwerp instead of attempting to join the Franco-British Armies.

"It may well be," writes Lieut.-General Galet, "that the perplexity of the Chief of the German General Staff was partly due to the incorrect information he had received, which caused him to reinforce the German troops in Belgium, but without any doubt, the principal source of his anxiety, and the reasons for the false steps he took . . . were to be found in the decisions of the Belgian Commander-in-Chief. On the 18th and 19th of August, the latter was wise enough to keep his army intact and to withdraw in the right direction. From August 20th to September 15th, cleverly making use of the great fortress of Antwerp, he employed this army, and to good purpose, in the direction in which the Germans were most sensitive. In this the King was not prompted by any Allied general. He acted entirely on his own initiative."<sup>1</sup>

(7) When in later life King Albert remembered his War experiences, he must have looked upon his last days in Antwerp, followed by the dismal retreat towards the sea, as the darkest period of his career. Without being unduly optimistic he had entertained from the beginning of the struggle a series of reasonable hopes which had been successively disappointed. He had first wished to defend the country on the strong position afforded by the Meuse.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

When obliged to give up this plan, he occupied the line of the Gette in the belief that Allied supports would allow him to spare the Capital and western Belgium the ordeal of a foreign invasion. The six weeks spent in Antwerp had allowed him to influence the course of operations and, after the successful second sortie coinciding with the victory of the Marne, he was justified in thinking that the forward movement of the Allied Armies would prevent the fall of the fortress and save Flanders at least from enemy occupation. He realized that the War would be of long duration, but he had good reason to expect that, after the severe check inflicted on the German offensive, he might effect a junction with the Franco-British forces on a front running from Antwerp to Lille, on the Allies' extreme left. For two months the Belgian Army had been waging a lonely fight against superior forces. The time seemed at last to have come when numbers and material would be more or less equalized and when the Belgians might be given a fair chance of success.

The fate of Antwerp will for long remain a subject of discussion between military experts, but the facts revealed by the German history of the War seem to show that the relief of the fortress was not so impracticable as it appeared in October 1914 to the French and British military authorities. Even if the German artillery had played havoc with the fortified works of the entrenched camp, the assault of the infantry, which was not far superior in numbers to the defenders and which lacked ammunition, might have been checked had French and British reinforcements reached the Scheldt a few days earlier. The problems which obsessed the responsible authorities were so pressing that it was not until the beginning of October that they fully realized the critical situation of the besieged city and the disastrous consequences of its impending fall.

From September 15th, the Germans displayed extraordinary activity, and information began to reach Belgian Headquarters showing that they were planning an offensive

on a large scale against Antwerp. Troops passed through Brussels and Liège on their way to the Belgian front, and several heavy siege guns which had destroyed the forts of Namur and Maubeuge were seen moving north.

On the 25th of September, the French Command once more urged King Albert to take the offensive against the enemy's communications. According to General Joffre the Germans seemed to have brought all their forces from Belgium towards the French front, leaving only a thin screen of troops before Antwerp. This information was in contradiction with the news received by the Belgian Intelligence Service during the previous ten days. The King nevertheless prepared a new sortie, the plan being only cancelled when he realized that a general attack on the fortress was imminent, and that it was essential to remain on the defensive.

This opinion was fully confirmed two days later, when the Germans succeeded in driving back the Belgian units occupying Termonde and Malines. At the same time, their artillery inflicted grave damage on the southern forts, more particularly on Wavre Sainte Catherine. The result of the bombardment caused great perturbation at Headquarters, which was divided between the partisans of a fight to the end, with all forces available, and those of an immediate retirement of the Field Army. Again, the King shunned both extremes. He wished to preserve the army from envelopment, but did not see the necessity of giving up the struggle before his communications were threatened. He conceived the plan of moving the bulk of his forces to the left bank of the Scheldt, and prolonging resistance in the open field without losing touch with the fortress: "Even if we are obliged to give up Antwerp," he declared, "we need not at once bolt right back to the coast."

On September 28th, he gave the order that the army's base, including hospitals, munition depôts and stores should be transferred to Ostend and Zeebrugge.

Two days later, M. Davignon warned the British and

French Ministers that the Government contemplated the possibility of the immediate fall of the fortress: "The Royal Government feels that it is its duty to call attention to the gravity of the situation. . . . It requests that the services which Belgium has rendered should be borne in mind, and in this critical situation asks for aid and protection." This was no news to the Allied diplomats, since an appeal for reinforcements had already been made to them a month before. The answer received on October 1st was disappointing. The French Government promised to send one Division, but the Military Attaché was unable to state whether it would consist of active or territorial troops. The Belgian Minister in London wired that the only available British force was a detachment of marines quartered at Dunkirk.

Both the Generalissimo and Sir John French, engaged in the "race to the sea" which followed the Battle of the Marne, discouraged the idea of sending reinforcements to Antwerp. The British Cabinet was divided, some Ministers being opposed to depleting the country of troops at a time when a German landing was still considered possible. Lord Kitchener himself only changed his mind at the eleventh hour. Few realized the paramount importance of the preservation of the Belgian coast and how costly its loss would prove to the Allies in the near future.

By that time the enemy, after two days of unprecedented bombardment, had delivered a general assault on the southern forts and succeeded in obtaining a foothold on the first line of defences. The Council, presided over by the King, decided that the Army should retire on the second line, running from Termonde to the Nèthe, and that the Belgian Government and the Diplomatic Corps should leave Antwerp the next day (October 3rd).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Under the mistaken impression that the King and the Army were leaving the town, Sir Francis Villiers sent a telegram to London which provoked Mr. Churchill's hurried visit to Antwerp. The Ministers decided to postpone their departure to await the arrival of the First Lord of the Admiralty.

In spite of the entreaties of his Ministers, King Albert refused to follow them, abiding by his former decision that resistance should be prolonged as long as communications with the sea were not seriously threatened. The situation was all the more critical as the partisans of an immediate retreat were gaining influence and spreading the rumour that no help was to be expected from the Allies. The arrival of Mr. Winston Churchill who announced, on October 3rd, that 2000 British marines would reach Antwerp almost immediately, and that important preparations were being made by the Allies, strengthened the King's hand and restored a certain amount of confidence.

With the help of the British marines the Belgians succeeded in re-establishing the situation during the following day, but the Commander-in-Chief was soon faced with a new threat. He learnt that the German right in northern France was rapidly extending towards Flanders, and had already reached the neighbourhood of Tournai. Mr. Winston Churchill and the Belgian Government sent a telegram to London stating that the Belgians would continue to resist, but asking for a definite answer with regard to reinforcements within three days.<sup>1</sup>

A message from Lord Kitchener reached Antwerp a few hours later promising the despatch of 18,000 men of the 7th Division and of a Cavalry Division, due at Zeebrugge on October 6th or 7th, and announcing the arrival at Ostend at about the same date of a French Territorial Division 15,000 strong and of 8000 *Fusiliers Marins*.

Had all these reinforcements arrived at the theatre of operations at the appointed time, it might still have been possible, if not to save the fortress, at least to establish a continuous front protecting the Flemish coast, but the French Division never reached Belgium, and the British forces which landed in Zeebrugge and Ostend, on October

<sup>1</sup> *British Official History of the War*, vol. II.

7th and 8th, could only move on Ghent after the fate of Antwerp was sealed.<sup>1</sup>

The attacks still increased in intensity on October 5th, and the Germans succeeded in crossing the Nèthe in one or two places. A night counter-attack failed to re-establish the line and the arrival of the two British Naval Brigades on the next day, did not compensate for this severe check. The town was now exposed to bombardment. In France, the German right wing had reached Armentières, and the communication of the Belgian Army might at any moment be threatened; besides, no fresh reinforcements had arrived, and the delay of three days had expired. In the afternoon the Belgians, completely worn out, were compelled to give up the line of the Nèthe and the Commander-in-Chief, in agreement with Mr. Churchill, decided to take up his third defensive position along the Scheldt, and to move the Field Army to the left bank of the river, leaving only in Antwerp the 2nd Division, the British Naval Division under General Paris, and the garrison troops.

His intention was not yet to retire and he still wished to conduct defensive operations from his new Headquarters, in close liaison with the town. He only gave way step by step, resisting the advice of alarm and despair as he had formerly opposed reckless confidence. "The attitude of the King and Queen through these tense and tragic days," writes Mr. Churchill, "was magnificent. The impression of the grave, calm Soldier-King presiding at Council, sustaining his troops and commanders, preserving an unconquerable majesty amid the ruin of his kingdom, will never pass from my mind."

During the same night the bulk of the Belgian Army crossed the Scheldt, while the defenders of the town took new positions between the inner forts.

When they awoke on the 7th, the inhabitants of Antwerp found the town placarded with notices announcing an imminent bombardment, and heard that the Government

<sup>1</sup> Major-General Sir F. Maurice: *Life of Lord Rawlinson*.

and the members of the Diplomatic Corps had left at dawn. Taken by surprise, they passed from a state of exaggerated confidence into a state of wild panic. Scarcely taking the time to pack their belongings, they rushed into the streets making for the Scheldt, crowding every available boat, or fled towards Ghent or Holland. The roads were filled with a solid mass of people. Old men and women, invalids, expectant mothers and small children were compelled to move with the others, tortured with hunger and thirst and shivering with cold. Almost lost in the crowd, the King's car moved slowly across the bridge of Steen the same afternoon in the wake of the Field Army, after General Deguise, Governor of the town, had received his last instructions: "Defend the place to the last."

The troops' nervousness was increased by the panic of the civilians. Some officers were obsessed by the fear that the Germans would surround the army and orders were given, without the Commander-in-Chief's knowledge, which jeopardized his connection with the town. It was with considerable difficulty that suitable provision was made for the retirement of the British Naval Division and of the Belgian 2nd Division when, on October 8th, the fall of the fortress became imminent. Meanwhile strong reinforcements had been sent towards the Scheldt to prevent the enemy from launching a flank attack. The corridor between the Dutch frontier and the German advance-posts, through which the army was compelled to pass, was only twelve miles wide.

On the same day, the King, who had established temporary Headquarters at Selzaete, received alarming news indicating that he could no longer rely on the fighting capacity of some of his best units. He was pressed by General Pau, General Joffre's representative, not to keep his army in Flanders but to send it forthwith to France where it could recuperate and reorganize, and he had to admit that no fresh efforts could be asked from his men before giving them a short period of rest. In these circum-

stances he submitted at last to the inevitable and allowed his Divisions to be moved beyond the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal, severing all connection with Antwerp.<sup>1</sup>

At an interview between M. de Broqueville, General Pau and General Rawlinson, head of the British Relief Force, it was decided to cover the retreat by sending part of the 7th British Division to Ghent where 8000 French marines had already detrained. This move delayed the advance of the enemy, and prevented any flank attack on the Belgian Army.

We know now that the King's decision, supported by Mr. Churchill, to remain in Antwerp to the last, was amply justified by results. The disappointment of General von Beseler when he found, on the 10th, the city almost emptied of troops, was only too evident: "Such a fortress," he exclaimed, "and no general!" Most of the fighting units had successfully escaped from the entrenched camp, only the fortress troops, 20,000 strong, being compelled to take refuge in Holland.

"Had the German siege army been released on the 5th," wrote Mr. Churchill, "nothing could have saved Dunkirk, and perhaps Calais and Boulogne." These five extra days gave the Allies time to organize their front on the Yser and around Ypres before the Battle of the Channel Ports. It is perhaps useless to speculate on the results which might have been obtained if King Albert's army had been reinforced in good time, whether in Antwerp or along the line of the Durme, but it is impossible properly to appreciate the part which he played during these critical days without recalling his attempt at consolidating the Allied front in Flanders. If the resistance of Antwerp saved the French ports, the stabilization of the Flemish front might have saved Zeebrugge and Ostend, which later became the strongest bases of German submarine warfare and the main objective of the British offensive of 1917.

<sup>1</sup> See sketch II.

(E) *The Yser*

(1) The campaign had opened in the glowing sun of August; it seemed to be closing in these cloudy and blustery days of October. Most of the soldiers and civilians who dragged themselves painfully along the narrow, muddy Flemish roads were under the impression that the end had come. It was a general *sauve qui peut*. The refugees carried with them their precious belongings, the men keeping pace with the exhausted women and children who again and again were compelled to rest. Their carts obstructed the progress of the troops, which were thrown into the wildest disorder. Many soldiers were in rags and in a pitiable state of exhaustion, their nerves being shaken by the bombardment to which they had been subjected during the last ten days. This dismal crowd, moving under lowering skies, during long days and longer nights, without food, without shelter, was thrown from time to time into a state of panic by rumours that "the Germans were there." There were spasmodic halts, making confusion worse confounded. The retreat had become a rout.

It was among such scenes that the King and Queen reached first St. Nicolas, and later Selzaete and Eecloo, where they spent the night of the 9th. The Commander-in-Chief witnessed the disorganization and demoralization of the small army which he had done so much to strengthen, to spare and to encourage. The King was brought into close contact with the spiritual and physical sufferings inflicted by the War on his people, especially on the ruined peasants clinging desperately to their last possessions. He was almost alone. Apart from the Prime Minister who had remained with him, he could obtain no help from the members of his Government now at Havre. With the exception of a few officers he could find little moral support in his Staff. Allied reinforcements had arrived too late; Flanders seemed now to be considered as a minor theatre

of operations. If ever a doubt of final victory penetrated his soul it must have been at that moment. He had fulfilled all his duty as a neutral and more than his duty as an ally, and he had not met with the response he had the right to expect.

In spite of his love of simplicity, King Albert felt keenly what was due not so much to him as to the country and the army he represented. He fully realized the loss of prestige which the fall of Antwerp inflicted upon them. The fortress was naturally considered by the Allies as the last stronghold of Belgian resistance. Now that it was broken and that the whole army was swept towards France in a state of confusion, might it not lose its independence, and be used and perhaps wasted in dangerous operations against its leader's own wishes? Reduced to 70,000 men, without sufficient equipment and ammunition, for what did it count among the vast host massed on the Western Front? Was it still possible to preserve a small corner of Belgian territory where it could fight on its own ground and fulfil its own destiny?

On October 10th, the King went to Ostend to confer with Generals Pau and Rawlinson. It was agreed between him and the French and British representatives that the base of the army, with all its stores, should immediately be moved to France. "We had the difficult task of imposing our military views," wrote General Lord Rawlinson, "on a body of men overwrought with chagrin, responsibility and despair. We succeeded in persuading them to send the Belgian Army to France, in inducing the Government to move to Dunkirk and the King himself to go to Havre, leaving us to deal with the military situation as best we might for the Allied cause. The King is, of course, much depressed and reluctant to leave his army; but he takes things wonderfully philosophically, and has acquiesced with all our suggestions."<sup>1</sup>

This account is somewhat misleading as far as King

<sup>1</sup> Major-General Sir F. Maurice: *Life of Lord Rawlinson*.

Albert is concerned. He was willing to comply with the Allies' wishes, since, considering the rapidity of the German advance, there seemed to be no other alternative, but he never agreed to leave his troops.

The *British Official History of the War* gives the following account of the situation: "By a prodigious effort, the Belgian Army had baffled its colossal adversary and finally escaped him, but now, after more than two months of uninterrupted operations and all the moral suffering which the gradual abandonment of national territory brought with it, time was required for rest and reorganization. It was at one moment proposed that the Belgians should retire west of the line St. Omer-Calais, but this, though completely justified by what they had gone through, meant giving up this last corner of Belgian territory, and was more than the spirit of the nation could endure. It was decided, therefore, that the Army should concentrate in the area Dixmude-Nieuport-Furnes, with its base at Dunkirk."

What happened exactly between the Ostend meeting on October 10th, and the historic Royal proclamation of October 13th urging the Belgian troops to defend to the end the last corner of national territory? The threat of a rapid pursuit by the enemy had not materialized and a spell of rest previous to its projected departure for France, had considerably improved the Belgian Army's morale. The King, after two days spent in Ostend, had moved to Nieuport, on the mouth of the Yser, and considered the possibility of defending the favourable position afforded by the stream. He had always shown a particular admiration for courage unshaken by adversity, and was fond of recalling the struggle waged in 1864-1867 by Benito Juarez against his uncle by marriage, the unfortunate Emperor Maximilian. He used to tell his officers how the Mexican leader, flying before superior forces, had sought refuge in the mountains of Ciudad del Norte and defended himself in that natural stronghold until the time had come to reconquer his country.

After inspecting the Belgian units which were being reorganized between Nieuport and Furnes, King Albert came to the conclusion that they were still capable of opposing the enemy's progress, if reinforced in time by the Allies. From the Belgian point of view it was essential that some part of national territory should escape the invader, and it was equally essential, in the interest of the Allies, that the Germans should be prevented from reaching Dunkirk and Calais, along the sea, and jeopardizing Franco-British communications. For the King foresaw already that, as soon as General von Beseler, after occupying Antwerp, could launch a new attack, this movement would be directed against the Allies' left wing, and he was convinced that the only means of countering it was to establish in West Flanders, more particularly along the Yser and the Ypres Canal, a continuous defensive line.

This conviction prompted him to issue his well-known proclamation on October 13th:

*Soldiers!*

*For over two months you have fought in a just cause for your homes and for the independence of your country.*

*You have held up the enemy armies, undergone three sieges, made several sorties and carried out without loss, a prolonged retreat.*

*Until this moment you have fought alone in the gigantic struggle.*

*You will now find yourselves alongside the gallant French and British Armies. It is for you to maintain the reputation of our arms by the tenacity and bravery of which you have already given such ample proofs. Our national honour is at stake.*

*Soldiers, look to the future with confidence and fight valiantly.*

*Face to the front in the positions in which I shall place you, and let him be regarded as a traitor to his*

*country who talks of retreat unless the order for it be given.*

*The moment has come, with the help of the Allies, to drive from our beloved country the enemy who has invaded it, regardless of his engagements and the sacred rights of a free people.*

While the Belgians were making these preparations, Allied Headquarters teemed with aggressive plans. The old conflict between offensive and defensive methods, which had caused so much trouble at Louvain, was once more revived under still less favourable circumstances.

In spite of the fact that General Pau had reported that the Belgians were not in a condition to fight, French Headquarters sent, on October 11th, a request that they should co-operate within forty-eight hours in a general offensive in Flanders. A suggestion was also made that the King should delegate his command to one of his generals who would receive his instructions from the Generalissimo: "In the new conditions and at a moment when the Belgian Army has been so greatly reduced, and is about to co-operate with the Franco-British Army, one question that arises is whether the King will not consider it a suitable moment to delegate the command to one of his generals."

The Sovereign's forebodings were more than fulfilled, but he did not allow his personal feelings to interfere with his country's interests and instructed his Prime Minister to reply: "The Sovereign, with the agreement of the Government, intends to retain the command of the Belgian Army whatever its strength. But, recognizing the necessity for unity of action between the Allies, he would be happy if the Generalissimo should act with the Belgian Army as he does with the British, and communicate directly with its Chief."

A smaller man might have been tempted to add some reference to strategical mistakes which were no doubt partly responsible for the weakening of the Belgian Army.

Such remarks, while soothing the Sovereign's personal pride, would have been of little use to the prosecution of the operations, and were wisely omitted.

On the 12th of October, the Belgians were informed that the Allies were preparing an attack on Lille, in which they were expected to co-operate in the district of Ypres. This operation left the Allied left flank completely unguarded, and appeared particularly dangerous in the light of recent information. The enemy had occupied Ghent and was rebuilding bridges further west. After some discussions it was agreed that General Rawlinson's troops, the French Naval Brigade, under Admiral Ronarch, and two Belgian Divisions should establish themselves in the district of Thourout, the rest of the army remaining on the Yser. This order had scarcely been given when a message came from General French requesting the help of the Belgian Army between Bruges and Roulers to support General Rawlinson who had been ordered to proceed further east, towards the Lys. In spite of the fact that this move jeopardized his preparations, the King decided to comply with British wishes, but the three divisions sent forward for that purpose were recalled the same evening, when it was heard that the operation had been given up.

After long discussions and a great loss of time and energy which might have been better employed, King Albert was at last allowed to proceed with the strengthening of the Yser defences. From his new Headquarters at Furnes he sent, on the 15th, an order which removed all uncertainty: "The line of the Yser is our last line of defence in Belgium, and its retention is essential for the general plan of operations. This line must therefore be held at all costs."

(2) From that moment the Commander-in-Chief, whose views had once more been confirmed by events, and who was no longer perturbed by divided responsibilities, seemed to have discovered a new source of energy. If the forth-

coming battle ended once more in retreat, Belgium would be entirely occupied by the Germans and her army would lose its freedom of movement. Recent events had shown that the sincere enthusiasm aroused in Allied countries at the beginning of August would soon fade if Belgian prestige suffered a fresh blow and if her army could be held responsible for a new German victory. In claiming for his men a sector of the Allied front on Belgian soil, the King had assumed a heavy responsibility which he intended to fulfil. In the life of an individual and of a nation, there comes a time when failure is fatal. It is no longer a question of exerting one's efforts to improve a situation but of raising one's energy to such a pitch that death becomes the only alternative to defeat. That time had come for Belgium and for her King. This leader who had always been ready to take advice, who preferred to persuade rather than to command, was transformed into a dominating personality, following his own counsel, acting with the utmost determination and speaking in such a stern voice that even those who were intimate with him wondered at the change.

He was aware that the most eloquent proclamations and the most decisive orders of the day were not enough to restore the shaken morale of his soldiers. They knew little or nothing of the Allied forces with which they co-operated; they scarcely realized the importance of the victory on the Marne; they only saw that all their hopes had been wrecked and that, if they had obtained temporary successes, these successes had invariably been followed by reverses. From the beginning of hostilities they had been faced with superior forces, exposed to the devastating effects of superior artillery, insufficiently supported by their own guns. Confidence in final victory had become so faint that the word could only call up a bitter smile upon their lips. The task to be achieved appeared so colossal that they refused even to consider it. They felt like pygmies fighting a giant.

The King played his last card. Only personal influence

could restore the balance. He himself called on every Divisional Commander and delivered his orders:

1. Any Divisional General whose Division gives way will be relieved of his command on the spot.
2. Any officer whose men abandon their trenches will be relieved of his command.
3. Under no pretext whatsoever, even if the line be ruptured, is there to be any retirement.
4. The officers of the General Staff will be distributed among the troops of the front line. They will remain there during the fighting, encouraging others instead of grumbling themselves. They will send back to the trenches any troops which abandon them.<sup>1</sup>

These orders were to be transmitted at once to all the officers of the Division and communicated by them to their troops.

At the same time the King, realizing that his depleted army could not indefinitely repel a series of attacks on a thirty-mile front, warned his Allies of the grave situation in which he was placed. He asked for the assistance of the British Navy to support his position in Nieuport from the sea, and he did not hide from General Foch, who visited Furnes for the first time on October 16th, that he could not be expected to stand alone for long. As the French General expressed the wish to see the Belgian Army taking part in the projected Franco-British offensive on Lille, he frankly replied that, as a constitutional monarch, he could not embark on any scheme which involved such heavy risks. He insisted that an attack on the Yser was imminent and that, as he had practically no reserves at his disposal, he relied on French assistance to relieve the situation in case of urgent need. General Foch, who entertained a more optimistic view of the situation replied: "The nations which wish to continue their existence as such must defend

<sup>1</sup> Galet, *op. cit.*

themselves. At the moment when we set out to reconquer Belgium, it would seem extraordinary if the Belgian Army were not at our side. I, a soldier of the Republic, assure Your Majesty that our cause is a just and righteous one, and that Providence will give us Victory."<sup>1</sup> In spite of this outburst, the General seems to have been impressed by the King's attitude. In a message to the Generalissimo, the same evening, he advised him to send some troops to the left of the Belgian Army as soon as he could spare them. When, on the 17th, the progress of strong German forces against the Yser position entirely confirmed the King's views, General Foch informed Belgian Headquarters that the French would be reinforced at Ypres and that a Division would detrain at Dunkirk on October 19th. The Belgians were thus able to shorten their line and increase their reserves.

The account of the first meeting of King Albert and General Foch and the discussions which followed during the Battle of the Yser must be interpreted in the light of the tribute paid by the latter to the Belgian Commander-in-Chief in December 1916:

SIRE,

Upon relinquishing the command of the group of the armies of the north, I cannot recall without emotion the circumstances which existed when I took up that post. The Belgian Army, after carrying out the defence of Antwerp, under a most intense bombardment had, by Your Majesty's orders, established itself on the Yser to stay the furious attacks of the enemy, to defend what was left of its territory, to await such reinforcements as I could provide, and finally to break up the enemy onrush, which, after the conquest of the whole of Belgium, was to imperil France and England by seizing Dunkirk and Calais.

It was indeed Your Majesty's energetic attitude which

<sup>1</sup> Galet, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

decided the course of action and it was the valour of the Belgian and French troops which eventually secured its success.

Ever since that time I have been specially honoured by the great kindness which Your Majesty has always shown me. My associations with the Belgian troops have deeply bound me to them. . . . I shall retain unforgettable memories of these days.

However severe the trial to which the Belgian nation has been subjected, Providence cannot much longer delay the moment of reparation.

The General had no doubt changed his mind. So had Colonel Brécard, the representative of French Headquarters who in the early days of the War had felt disappointed at the King's attitude.<sup>1</sup> In his memoirs, this officer gives an account of a conversation which he had with the Belgian Sovereign on the eve of the Battle of the Yser: "His country is now almost completely invaded," he writes, "he is entirely cut off from Brussels, his Government is at Havre, his Minister of War at Dunkirk, his young recruits at Cherbourg; and his Army which has already suffered such severe losses, and has been separated from the Allies, still defends with the utmost energy the last corner of land which remains Belgian. Before this tragedy—the end of which no one can foresee—the King is alone, absolutely alone with the Queen, facing his responsibilities. Both are sustained by their deep patriotism and the sense of duty towards their people. What an example and what a lesson!"<sup>2</sup>

(3) The Battle of the Yser remains the epic of Belgium. It has been repeatedly sung and described by her poets and prose writers, and is rightly considered as the climax of her War tragedy. It is not difficult to understand

<sup>1</sup> See p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> Général Brécard: *En Belgique auprès du Roi Albert*.

why it has not assumed so much importance abroad. In the eyes of the general public it does not stand in the same light as the early events of August, when Belgium's decision to defend her neutrality at all cost stirred the world's enthusiasm, and when her Army was alone in the field at Liège and on the Glette. Most British and French military writers, on the other hand, are naturally inclined to consider the Battle of the Yser as a mere episode of the great struggle waged, in October and November 1914, around Ypres and in northern France.

It was, nevertheless, the turning-point in the defence of Belgian territory and in King Albert's military career. It restored the country's prestige after the tragedy of Antwerp, definitely secured a foothold for the Belgian Army in Flanders, and established its Commander's reputation as one of the wisest and most energetic military leaders of the Great War. Not only did he forestall the Germans' intention to force their way to the French ports along the sea, but he succeeded, in the most unfavourable circumstances, in instilling into his troops the spirit of devotion and sacrifice to duty which inspired all his own thoughts and actions. He became for them not merely a hero of individual valour but a living example, a Soldier-King, sharing their dangers and sufferings. As he had been looked upon in peace-time as the first citizen in the country, he was now considered as the first soldier in the trenches. He succeeded in breaking down the moral barrier which so often divides Headquarters and their Staff from the front line, and many men fought in these days not only for the defence of their independence, but for the personal affection and loyalty they felt towards their leader.

From October the 18th to the 31st, this small army of 53,000 rifles, helped by a brigade of French Marines, succeeded in checking the advance of five German Divisions, about 65,000 men, provided with superior artillery and equipment. Owing to the losses suffered during the

campaign the six Belgian Divisions were far below establishment. The 7000 men of the French 42nd Division reached the theatre of operations four days after the beginning of the battle and could only be used efficiently three days later.

For a full week the depleted Belgian Army, sorely tried by a series of reverses, deprived of sufficient reserves, short of guns and ammunition, had to stand almost alone against the full weight of the most violent German offensive. Never did its spirit rise so high, never did the dogged determination of the nation show in a finer light. It must have been of these days that King Albert thought when he wrote, many years later, his letter-preface to General Galet's book: "The German ultimatum, striking as it did at the deep love of independence which was the heritage of the Belgian people, aroused in them a common will to resist that went far to compensate for the weakness of their armed forces. This book tells of the use which Belgium made of these forces in the course of the struggle which followed."

Thanks to their unity of command and superior organization, the Germans nearly always managed to attack the Allies with larger forces during the first months of the War. The balance could only be righted by the courage inspired in the French, British and Belgians through a deeper belief in the righteousness of their cause. In this sense the Marne, Ypres, and the Yser may be considered as moral victories. In each case material "weakness" was "compensated" by this "will to resist" which all the devices of modern warfare could not crush.

The Belgians held the line extending from the sea to the north of Ypres, following the Yser and the Ypres Canal, on a front twenty-five miles long. The northern sector was defended by the 2nd, 1st and 4th Divisions, the salient of Dixmude by the French Naval Brigade under Admiral Ronarch and two Belgian units, and the southern sector by the 3rd and 6th Divisions. The 5th Division, two





Brigades of the 3rd Division and one Cavalry Brigade formed the reserve.<sup>1</sup>

On the 18th, the main effort of the enemy bore on the outposts, and more particularly on the village of Lombartzyde, close to the sea, east of the stream. The enemy was repulsed, and Headquarters were comforted by the news that the French 42nd Division, under General Grossetti, would reach the battlefield on the 22nd or 23rd.

The next day, the attack was renewed with greater violence, and a first attempt was made by the Germans to cross the stream; the situation was, however, restored in the afternoon.

On the 20th, the whole front was heavily bombarded, but the enemy concentrated his attacks on Lombartzyde which was lost, and on Dixmude which was held, thanks to the resolute leadership of Admiral Ronarch and the Belgian Colonels Jacques and Meiser. After three days, the Germans had not reached the Yser at a single point.

On the 21st, the fighting grew desperate in the sector of Dixmude. It was necessary to call upon the reserves in order to give some relief to the exhausted troops. Confidence prevailed nevertheless at Furnes after the arrival of the leading battalions of the French Division and the visit paid to Headquarters by General Joffre. The situation seemed indeed so satisfactory that the Generalissimo was not troubled with further requests for reinforcements. The King was, however, deeply disappointed when he heard in the evening from General Grossetti that his instructions were to establish the 42nd Division in Nieuport. He was well aware that the Germans were concentrating their efforts on his centre and, as his reserves were now reduced to five or six battalions, he greatly regretted that these fresh troops could not be used in the sector where they were most needed. Once more, the conflicting views of French and Belgian Headquarters were increasing his anxieties.

On the next day, the 22nd, after the enemy had

<sup>1</sup> See also *ibid* III.

secured a foothold on the left bank of the Yser in spite of costly counter-attacks, the Sovereign received the visit of General d'Urbal, commanding the French units on the Belgian front. The General, who had recently arrived in Flanders, had so poor an opinion of the fighting qualities of the Germans that he entertained no doubt as to the success of a general offensive. The interview ended rather abruptly after King Albert had expressed his astonishment that, in the circumstances, the Allies should not yet have reached the Rhine.

The situation did not improve on the 23rd, the French remaining at Nieuport and the Germans gaining ground at various points on the stream. The most heavily engaged divisions were completely exhausted, certain units having spent three days and nights in the fighting line. At the time when King Albert was receiving the news of the death of some of his most devoted officers, he heard that General Foch had refused his request to use the Grossetti Division in the threatened sector, and was further informed that, "according to reliable information, the enemy forces in the river-bend amount to five and a half battalions." For once his equanimity was seriously disturbed, and he drafted a reply which was only held up by the news that his wishes had been partly granted. He particularly resented "the belittling of his soldiers' immediate opponents which had gone on ever since the beginning of the campaign." He declared that this practice was "tantamount to insulting his army by the suggestion that it was unable to resist, or thrust back, negligible forces." "I protest most strongly," he concluded, "against these false statements. At present, my army is holding back superior forces. Ever since August 4th it has continued to fight desperately. For the last week it has performed prodigies of gallantry, and has freely shed its blood in the common cause."<sup>1</sup>

Was the Commander-in-Chief thinking of the men of four battalions of infantry who, on the same day, had

<sup>1</sup> Galet, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

deliberately sacrificed themselves while trying to regain the left bank of the stream near Tervaete, the senior officers charging and falling at the head of their men? Or was he alluding to the regiments which had clung for so long to the muddy embankments under devastating shell-fire that, when at last they gave way, the men scarcely preserved any human appearance, dazed by fatigue and hunger, clothed in clay, drenched with rain, their uniforms torn, their boots ruined, and, in spite of all, so strongly bound by a common loyalty that, when their officers spreading out their arms, shepherded them again towards the firing-line, they turned their back to life and returned to their posts?

French reinforcements were at last sent on the morning of the 24th towards the centre of the line, but they could not reach the Yser before noon. When they arrived, the Belgians had been pressed back to the embankment of the Nieuport-Dixmude railway, which formed the last obstacle now that the little stream had been crossed. General Grossetti could only spare four battalions; their commanders soon realized the difficulty of counter-attacking through open meadows interlaced with ditches, without any natural cover and under the fire of the enemy's machine-guns. As his troops, after seven days' fighting without regular relief, were at the end of their resources, the King felt justified in asking that the whole French Division should be moved to the threatened area.

This request brought General Foch to Furnes. Under the impression that the situation was not so critical as the Belgians described it, he insisted that they should show more energy. "As to the question of reinforcements," he exclaimed, "I am not in a position to command. You have held on for eight days and you will hold for eight days longer." He was in a very excitable frame of mind, and prepared to leave without asking for an audience; the King, however, expressed the wish to see him and a short conversation took place between them. We do not know

what happened during the interview, but the same evening General Grossetti was informed that there was no point "in pressing the offensive at Lombartzyde," and that he should strengthen the centre of the Belgian Army, "which at this moment was the principal objective of enemy attacks." Headquarters also received news that fresh reinforcements were on their way to the battlefield.

The situation remained, nevertheless, extremely critical, owing not only to the exhausted condition of the troops who clamoured for relief, but to losses in artillery material, the guns being worn out by continued firing. The wastage amounted to 50 per cent. and the stores of ammunition became alarmingly low. It was more and more evident that the French plans for an offensive could not be realized, and that the best that could be hoped for was the stabilization of the Yser front. Under these circumstances, the Sovereign ordered all necessary preparations to be made for the flooding of both banks of the stream.

It had occurred to Commandant Nuyten, of the General Staff, that, owing to the position of the railway embankment from Nieuport to Dixmude, it might be possible to use this last means of resistance without altering the position of the Belgian line, if the culverts which pierced the embankment were blocked to prevent the water from reaching the trenches. After discussing this plan with the lock-keeper at Nieuport, he submitted his idea to the Commander-in-Chief, who received it favourably and at once gave the necessary instructions (October 25th).

That same night, an incident occurred at Dixmude which showed that the position was still fraught with grievous danger, the defenders being too tired to keep an efficient watch and the enemy being more determined than ever to pierce their lines. Taking advantage of a violent storm, which increased the confusion, a German battalion succeeded in penetrating into the town and nearly achieved the destruction of the Belgian batteries.

On the 26th, the 1st and 2nd Divisions were in their

turn obliged to abandon their position, and the line could only be re-established along the railway with the help of some French battalions from Nieuport. This news caused a certain alarm at Headquarters and plans were even prepared for a possible retirement, but the King had no thought of leaving the Yser. He replaced the order already prepared by his Staff by the following: "To-morrow, the Army, reinforced by French troops, will continue to defend its position." He was convinced that the Germans must by now feel the strain of their long efforts and that, if they obtained some local advantage, they would be incapable of pursuing it. The position of his artillery caused him great anxiety, but he was resolved, if need be, to place the Yser country under water, rather than to allow the enemy to cross it.

Before reaching a final decision, he wished, nevertheless, to visit British Headquarters and to ascertain whether fresh reinforcements could not be obtained. He drove to St. Omer during the evening and was made welcome by Sir John French and his Staff. The result of the visit was negative, but the Sovereign seems, nevertheless, to have been cheered by the "phlegmatic imperturbability" of his hosts.

The three next days marked a lull in the operations. This short break was used to organize the defence by rotation, so that the men should henceforth rely on some regular rest, and to experiment, during the night, on the locks at Nieuport. It was first hoped that the necessary result could be obtained by opening the old sluice which was within the Belgian lines, but the volume of water released being insufficient it was found necessary to open the Noordvaert Weir controlling the channel of the Yser which was, by that time, in No Man's Land and could only be reached by crossing a canal on the footbridge of the lockgate, under the enemy's fire. Captain Ume, accompanied by the waterman Geeraert and three sappers, volunteered, nevertheless, to operate the locks within a few steps of the German outposts, on the night of the 29th.

From that moment, the inundation began to rise "invincible and implacable in its slow progress. It stretched as an immense sheet of water, slightly undulating. . . . It came noiselessly, filling the canals, levelling the ditches, the roads and the shell-holes. It glided, slipped, oozed everywhere. It was a silent conqueror at first scarcely visible. The water surrounded islets of rising ground, whence groups of soldiers fled drenched to the knees. It murmured patiently along the trenches, it came from the horizon and reached the horizon. . . . It did not give victory, it ensured its permanence."<sup>1</sup>

Before the full effect of the inundation was felt in the low meadows occupied by the Germans they had time to launch a new offensive on the Belgian centre. After a fierce assault they succeeded in crossing the railway at one point and in establishing themselves in the village of Ramskapelle, from which they were ultimately ejected by a Franco-Belgian counter-attack. This was the enemy's last effort, the water rising steadily and compelling him to retire to higher ground towards the East.

King Albert had won his first great victory.

(4) The importance of the inundation has been exaggerated by certain writers. It certainly contributed largely to the success of the Belgian defensive operations, as the struggle could not be indefinitely prolonged owing mainly to the depletion of Belgian artillery, but the position was not more critical on the 30th than it had been on several occasions during the previous week. The King bore the whole responsibility of the battle, and it is to him and to his faithful troops that the honour of the victory is due.

German military records show plainly that the Staff relied on the offensive of their right wing to obtain a decision in the Battle of the Channel Ports. They intended to turn the left wing of the Allies by forcing their way

<sup>1</sup> *Pierre Nethomb - R. R. - ill, d. p Y. r.*

along the sea, while preventing the progress of the British at Ypres. Before the final attack of October 30th, the Duke of Würtemberg had made it clear that "the issue of the whole War hung upon the result achieved." The next day von Beseler was obliged to report that the "continuation of the offensive appeared to be impossible." German Headquarters were all the more disappointed "because it was precisely from the advance of the right wing that a decision was expected."

King Albert said once: "I am a soldier, I serve in the army where I won my stripes. I value my military reputation." If there was a subject on which this most modest and retiring man was sensitive it was perhaps his conduct of military operations, especially when the valour of his soldiers was in question. The memorandum which he prepared on October 23rd has already been quoted.<sup>1</sup> Twelve years later, the *Matin* published an interview with Marshal Foch in which the latter was made to say that he prevented the projected retirement of the Belgian Army in "November 1914." The King immediately wrote to the Maréchal expressing the astonishment he had felt in reading the article, and reminding his correspondent that he had given strict instructions that the Yser line should be held at all cost: "It is true that, on October 26th, the critical circumstances against which the troops were struggling led the Chief of Staff to envisage the possibility of a retreat to a position in the rear; but you are aware that this project did not receive my approval and that I always opposed its being considered. Besides, all this happened in October and not in November. . . . It goes without saying that I realize what the cause of the Allies owes to your energy, and that your insistent message to General Joffre hastened the arrival of the reinforcements which were so sorely needed. I feel it my duty to express to you once more the gratitude which we all feel towards you for your invaluable help on this occasion, but as Maréchal de France, embodying the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 212.

chivalrous virtues of a noble nation, you will, I am sure, understand that I am bound to maintain intact the well-deserved reputation of my officers and soldiers who, through their courage and tenacity, when all is said and done, are responsible for the happy issue of the battle of the Yser." It must be added that Marshal Foch never made the declarations attributed to him, and in his answer again payed homage to the Belgian Army and to its leader.

The King was convinced that, considering the perfect preparations of the Germans and the surprise attack which they had launched on the Western Front, a defensive strategy alone could lead the Allies to successful results. As far as he was concerned it was the only possible policy. As a constitutional monarch he had been placed at the head of the national forces for the purpose of protecting Belgian territory and upholding Belgian independence. He considered that the army had been entrusted to him, and that he was responsible to his people for its safety. He always kept this in mind and would never allow his men to be used in operations which, even if successful, would prove in the end too costly. It took some time for the Allies, and especially for the French military leaders, fully to understand this attitude, and to realize that this *Cunctator* was just as determined as themselves to throw his all into the struggle when no other alternative was left. He was at one with them in refusing to entertain the idea of retreat from the Yser line, even when the situation was most threatening, and consented to the heaviest sacrifices in order to maintain his last defensive line.

The Belgian losses can easily be estimated in comparing the effectives of the Divisions before and immediately after the battle. They dropped from 52,683 men on October 18th, to 34,161 on October 30th; during these twelve days the army lost a third of its effectives in dead, wounded and missing.

A final appreciation of King Albert's generalship was given, a few years ago, by General Azan, chief of the historical

section of the French General Staff: "What would have happened," he writes, "if the Belgian Army in following a southerly direction towards the Lys had left open to the German onrush a gap of thirty miles? It would have been outflanked and the Allies would have been cut off from the sea. In deciding to stop his army on the natural obstacle of the Yser, King Albert created the extreme sector of the continuous front which soon extended from Switzerland to the sea. In consenting to subordinate his army to the instructions of the Generalissimo, he contributed largely to the Allies' unity of action, without however abdicating his own command and his own responsibilities. In exerting himself to communicate his personal energy to his troops, in refusing to give the order to retire, in spite of a critical situation, he showed an admirable firmness. . . . In his relations with the Allies he was a calm, thoughtful, well-balanced and conciliatory collaborator, who quietly and unostentatiously followed a strategic course which perhaps exerted a decisive influence on the issue of the War. He closed the gateway of the North to the German invasion, and with troops which had reached the very end of their endurance kept it closed until assistance arrived."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Général Azan: *La Bataille de l'Yser.*

## CHAPTER SIX

### La Panne (1914-1918)

#### (A) *The Watch on the Yser*

ON July 17th 1831, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg left Calais in the early morning and, after crossing the French frontier, followed the shore until he reached the small fishing village of La Panne. There he was met by a group of Belgian delegates and by a company of Civic Guards and parted with his French escort. It is exactly on the spot where the first King of the Belgians entered his new kingdom that his grandson spent the years of the war with his family.

In the last century, the stretch of dunes, extending from Nieuport to the French frontier, was a desert of sand in which silence was only interrupted by the crash of breakers and the plaintive call of sea-gulls. Much of its wild beauty had already disappeared in pre-War days, and La Panne itself had become, as every other village on the coast, a typical seaside resort, crowded and noisy during the holiday months, abandoned and desolate during the winter season.

There were many startling changes in Flanders during the War; peaceful country villages became fiercely contested strongholds; mediæval market-places witnessed an incessant flow of motors and tanks; rich meadows were converted into desolate marshes. But nothing appears so incongruous as the transformation of La Panne into a military centre; hospitals in the hotels, the Sovereign in a villa, soldiers drilling on the shore. It is among such surroundings that the watch on the Yser began, and that the legend of the Soldier-King developed into one of the finest spiritual realities of modern history.

(1) "The Royal Villa," as it is called nowadays, is a square red-brick building standing at the far end of the sea-front. Its present owner, M. Maskens, Belgian Minister at The Hague, has carefully preserved the house in the state in which it was left in 1918. There is no central heating, no hot water in the bedrooms: it is just a typical, old-fashioned Belgian seaside house. The Royal children's playroom was in the basement, and some of their favourite pictures can still be seen on the walls. The wine-cellars communicate with an underground shelter against air-raids, to which La Panne was frequently exposed. In the entrance hall are a few family portraits; the dining-room opens on to the sea, the smoking-room on to the dunes. The King himself had carefully marked, on the frame of the sitting-room door, the height of his growing children, the last dates being for Princess Marie José and for Prince Leopold, August 6th 1918, and for Prince Charles, August 10th of the same year.<sup>1</sup> The furniture of the bedroom is of the simplest; twin beds, an old-fashioned *lavabo*, and a large crucifix against the wall.

The Sovereign was not in exile. He had been compelled to leave Brussels and to establish himself behind the unbroken front of the Yser, among his faithful soldiers. The true Capital was where he was, and during these months La Panne was visited by two foreign sovereigns and by a number of distinguished soldiers and statesmen. When any change occurred in the Diplomatic Corps, the newly appointed ministers made a point of calling there before taking up their residence in Brussels.

Belgian Headquarters were close by, first at Furnes and, after that town had been heavily bombarded, in the presbytery of the small village of Houthem. The Government was at Havre, where it enjoyed the privilege of extritoriality, but the Sovereign was in constant communication with his ministers, and no important decision was taken without his approval. Since Parliament could

<sup>1</sup> See plate 6.

not be summoned he governed by decrees, and assumed the direction of affairs. This was no infringement of the Constitution, which allowed him to exert the legislative as well as the executive power in exceptional circumstances. Every measure taken in those days was accompanied by the following preamble: "Considering Article 26 of the Constitution, which confers the exercise of the legislative power on the King; the House of Representatives and the Senate; considering the impossibility of summoning the legislative chambers, following the proposal of Our Minister . . . We decree. . . ." It was thus from La Panne, and during the winter of 1917-18, from the farm-château of *Les Moëres*, where he went after the Nieuport sector had been taken over by the British troops, that the Commander-in-Chief reorganized his army and the Sovereign administered his country's affairs.

Such conditions were unprecedented, and the work could not have been carried out successfully without the active collaboration of the British and French Governments and the help of American sympathizers. Financially Belgium did not enjoy any credit; the stores and reserves of the army were depleted; the Belgians abroad were scattered in Holland, Great Britain and France; and communications between independent and occupied Belgium were rendered extremely difficult by the strict measures taken to isolate the conquered provinces from the rest of the world. Success was mainly due to the King's moral prestige which strengthened the hands of the officers and statesmen who carried out the necessary negotiations with Allies and friends. This prestige was all the greater in that it was used sparingly.

The Sovereign's decision to remain constantly on Belgian soil, close to the front, was no doubt inspired by his sense of duty and by his devotion to his army, but it happened that this course was also the wisest which he could follow under the circumstances. He never left West Flanders during the four following years, but for short journeys to the French and Italian fronts, and for a flying visit to England in

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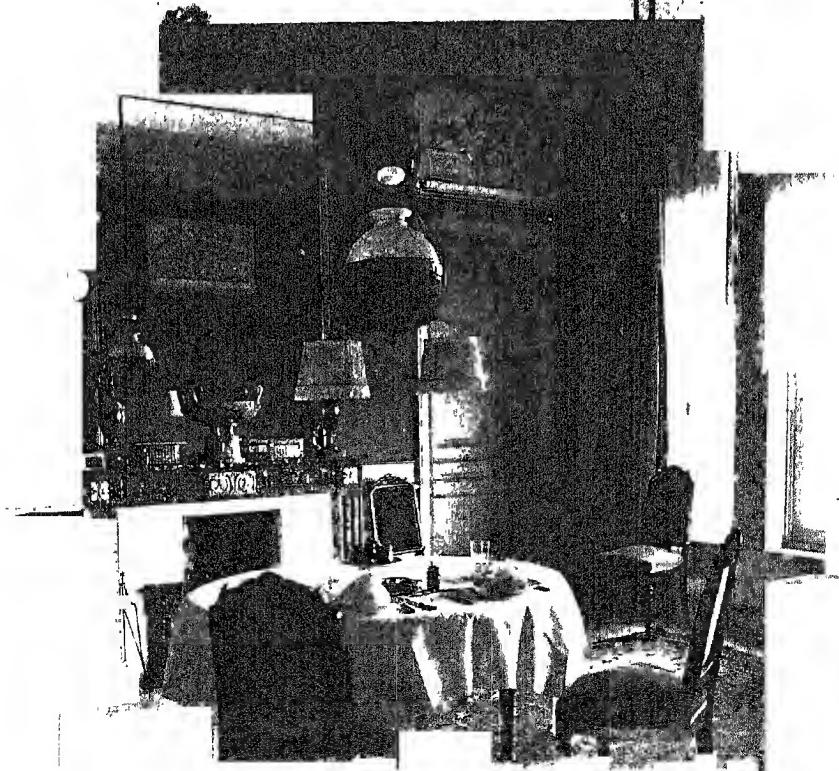
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6. The dining-room of the "Royal Villa," La Panne, during  
the War.

Above, the marks made by the King, on the sitting-room door,  
to measure his children's heights. (*Photo: Dubois.*)

1918. His very remoteness preserved the popularity which he enjoyed in all friendly countries. Its origin and mainstay was the devotion of his troops. It spread from the front line to the rear, from Belgian soldier to Belgian civilian and from Belgium to allied and neutral countries. King Albert was worshipped as the symbol of the oppressed land, as the wise leader of the national army. He was keeping watch and he would choose his time. The gratification which the Belgians felt at the thought that twenty square miles of their territory had been preserved and that their Sovereign was still "at home" could not be rated too highly. *La Panne* became their Mecca, the centre of their spiritual world, towards which they turned their eyes morning and night.

(2) King Albert's soldiers had already seen him during the Antwerp sorties and during the last great struggle on the Yser, walking unconcerned in the firing-line, exposing himself to danger with the greatest calm, never flustered, never hurried. They saw him now more frequently, sometimes accompanied by the Queen. There are innumerable stories concerning these visits and the surprise which they caused. Some are authenticated, others have been obviously embellished while being handed round, and provide interesting material to the student of folk-lore.

A soldier's diary relates how, in front of Dixmude, a company resting in the front trenches, after twenty-four hours spent in the advance-posts, was roused by a flustered sergeant, bringing the news that the Queen was coming: "Suddenly a group emerges from one of the communication trenches: a small and graceful woman attracts the attention of the soldiers . . . she passes like a vision, a few pleasant words, a smile and the dream has vanished. The amazed sergeant is questioned by an attendant officer: 'Are you a sergeant?'—'Yes (glancing quickly at the badges of rank), General.' After a few words the presumed officer disappears. The sergeant is immediately asked: 'Well, what did he say?'—'Who, the General?'—'General! It was the

King!'—‘The King! So simple . . . I should never have thought it possible.’’<sup>1</sup> He usually asked his men whether they were satisfied with their rations, whether their shelters were in good condition, did they receive enough vegetables, were they still plagued with rats?

Again in the sector of Dixmude, which he preferred to the others because it was more exposed, he reached the trenches one evening and was duly challenged, only being admitted after giving the password. His attempt to force the barrier which obstructed the trench provoked outspoken protest on the other side. After obeying the instruction given him in most energetic language, the King was at last recognized by the officer in command, but without paying any attention to his apologies, he merely explained: “I have come to see if your men are not cold,” and proceeded to examine every shelter, feeling the blankets, inquiring whether the men lacked anything, whether they had any news from home. He thus spent an hour with them, only a few yards from the enemy’s line.<sup>2</sup>

These visits extended to the advance-posts where observers constantly watched the enemy’s movements. “On a cold February morning,” writes one of them, “my attention was riveted to my telescope when I heard a sound on the steps. Thinking I was dealing with a comrade, I shouted roughly: ‘Hallo there, careful with the sandbags,’ and I went on with my work. All at once, I heard a strange voice saying: ‘Corporal, I should be very much interested to know what you are watching so carefully.’ I turned round; it was the King. Confused, I stood to attention and apologized. . . . After scrutinizing the place which I indicated, he asked me to point out to him a few strategical points. . . . Later, he asked me the time. As I called up my telephone exchange, the Major who accompanied him, remarked that I ought to have a watch of my own and I was forced to admit that my watch was out of order.

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> Abbé J. Leclercq: *Albert, Roi des Belges*, p. 94.

Before leaving the King asked me: ‘Corporal, are you satisfied here?’—‘Yes and no, Sire, I have been on duty for fifty-two days and I can find no one to relieve me,’ and I explained that my chin was badly inflamed. ‘Very well,’ said he, ‘to-morrow you will hear from me,’ and he asked the Major to take my name. I waited anxiously. What would I hear? Had I not blundered? But the next day, in the early morning, an observer came to relieve me, and gave me at the same time a permit for a fortnight’s leave. On my return to the front I found a small parcel addressed to me. It contained a fine wrist-watch. It has been admired by every soldier in my regiment as the gift of His Majesty the Soldier-King.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a deep-rooted “childlikeness” in the soul of man which even the worst horrors of war cannot obliterate. These soldiers who, after three months’ strenuous fighting, found themselves deprived of all news from their families, yearned for some diversion to relieve the tedious monotony of trench life and to bring them, for one short moment, into contact with the warm atmosphere of home. In December 1914, a single stick of chocolate was a treasure to be carefully divided among the comrades who shared the same shelter; a packet of cigarettes was worth its weight in gold. The King and Queen could not adequately supply their soldiers with “comforts” until the Commissariat was able to cope with their most essential requirements, but they succeeded nevertheless in relieving their feeling of isolation. The news of a Royal Visit spread to the whole sector, gifts were shown round, “comforts” were shared, and a day came when the “boys” realized that they were no longer alone. If they were, for the time being, cut off from their families, they had found here, in the muddy trenches of the Yser, a young father and mother anxious to help them, ready to share their fate.

<sup>1</sup> An order for 5000 of these watches, made of gun-metal, with the Sovereigns’ initials interlaced in gold, was given at the time to a Swiss concern. De Paeuw: *Albert, troisième Roi des Belges*, p. 86.

The Queen entered into the spirit of this pathetic game. While she wandered through the military hospitals, many delirious men had called her their mother, dreaming that they recognized the touch of her hand and the light in her eyes. She understood moral as well as physical suffering. The "children," she decided, should have toys to play with. The Sovereigns devoted all available resources to this object. "My dear niece," wrote King Albert to Marie Louise d'Orléans, "I shall send you my wedding present at a later date; at present I should consider it wrong to deprive our soldiers of the smallest sum of money."

The Queen took numberless snapshots and later sent autographed pictures to the men she had visited. One day, the enemy artillery proving particularly active, the officers begged her to leave, as shells were bursting close by. "Allow me, at least," she exclaimed, "to photograph the smoke." On another occasion she was urged not to expose herself within sight of enemy snipers. "I am so small they will not see me," she protested laughing. She provided her "children" with all kind of games, even "toy-theatres," and at a later date encouraged the organization of concerts behind the lines, enlisting the services of the best soldier-musicians in a symphonic orchestra. The King, on his side, encouraged sports, and made a point of attending races and matches between the picked teams of his Divisions.

From the first days of the campaign he had insisted on the need of strengthening discipline, but he knew how to temper justice with indulgence now that his men had shown their mettle. When questioned on the subject they invariably replied: "*Il est juste, mais bon.*" No abuse, they insisted, would take place if he knew of it. He was not "stuck up" and knew when to shut his eyes to harmless mischief. "Two soldiers," writes one of them, "were wandering in the dunes no doubt after rabbits, when they saw coming towards them a superior officer. 'A general!' exclaimed the first. 'No,' answered the other, 'only the King.'" They did not avoid him, and he returned their

salute.<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, while passing close to an aviation ground, the Sovereign noticed the Squadron Commander sitting in a garden with his wife. The officer, greatly alarmed, came forward immediately, saying: "Your Majesty finds me at fault, I am here with my wife."—"I also," he answered, "am here with my wife."<sup>2</sup>

This genuine familiarity with soldiers and civilians alike was, throughout his reign, one of the main reasons for King Albert's popularity. Never did it cause so much delighted surprise than with the army on the Yser. He was in supreme command; he had reached the pinnacle of ambition as statesman and general, and was perhaps the most universally popular figure of the War. But his simplicity remained unaltered. The severe trial he had recently undergone had strengthened his resolution and had, no doubt, confirmed his innate belief in the fragility of human promises; but no injustice from friend or foe, no caprice of destiny could shake his consciousness of human brotherhood and of the vanity of pomp and circumstance. On the contrary, after witnessing his soldiers' patient sacrifices, he felt for them a deep affection which lasted until his death.

Never could he speak without emotion of the days spent with them on the Yser, and his voice altered when he once remarked: "*Ils ont beaucoup souffert.*" "In the name of a so-called Liberty," he declared on another occasion, "we asked of free men, in the twentieth century, much more than what was ever extorted from the serfs in the Dark Ages—and they gave it."<sup>3</sup>

The constant exercise of power develops in weaker souls a strange intoxication, based on the belief that obedience to their orders implies a recognition of their essential superiority. They become callous and account other lives cheap because their own appears exceptionally valuable. They add an exaggerated importance to the homage paid

<sup>1</sup> Leclercq, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Daye: *La Vie et la Mort d'Albert Ier.*

to them and make an idol of "ceremony." Like Shakespeare's Harry, Albert I might have exclaimed:

O ceremony, show me but thy worth!  
What is thy soul of adoration?

But he would not have complained that his authority was merely based on "awe and fear." It was a trust placed in him; he was responsible for the army to the nation; he was "in charge" of his soldiers who had confided their lives into his hands. He felt this so keenly that he heard their grumbling with inexhaustible indulgence: "They had suffered a great deal."

If the position in which he had been placed gave him the right to command, the knowledge of what his men had gone through filled him, at the same time, with a burning sympathy, in the etymological sense of the word—suffering together. He was proud to be one of them, and delighted in surprising them in their labours and in witnessing their astonishment when his identity was revealed. This trait is the origin of a crop of stories which cannot all possibly be true, for if they were the King must have spent most of his time roving incognito through the Belgian trenches. "One day," runs one of them, "when he had left his orderly officer and reached the front line, wearing only his long trench coat, he met a few soldiers on fatigue duty, carrying food to some advance-post. The men were heavily laden and walked with difficulty on the sodden ground. 'Hi, you big one,' cried one of them, seeing the new-comer, 'couldn't you lend a hand?' Without hesitation, Albert I seized one of the dixies and followed in the file. When he reached the advance-post the same soldier, without thanking him, looked him over: 'I've never seen you! How is that? Do you belong to the regiment?'—'No,' he answered, 'I am only the King.'"

Such tales are told of the Emperor Charles V and Henry IV of France; Frederick II of Prussia called them "the tricks of the trade." With King Albert, they were

merely the result of a sincere desire to discard the shackles of etiquette and to behave as one of these simple men whom he understood so well, and with whom he felt more at ease than in the glamour of court life. He did not play a part or assume a disguise. It was quite enough that his badge of command should be unnoticed for him to be taken for an ordinary soldier. Those who had never met him before had no doubt seen his picture. But how could they imagine that a King could talk and act as he did? If he had been prompted by the desire of nursing his popularity the men would no doubt have had their suspicions; they would have felt some condescension in his manner, a tone of patronage in his voice. They were deceived by his incognito because he remained himself, a great statesman, a great general, a scholar and a gentleman, untouched by worldliness, childlike among his "children."

(5) On April 8th 1915, the 12th Regiment of the Line, which had won high distinction at the front, stood in square formation on the shore of La Panne. Among a small group of guests were Lord Athlone and Princess Alice whose friendship was highly valued by the Royal Family through the War. The men knew that Prince Leopold and his brother and sister had been helping their mother in her work in the military hospitals and the schools of West Flanders. They could scarcely believe the rumour that this young boy, only thirteen years of age, was going to join the army as a private. It was against all precedent. Leopold II had been made a lieutenant in 1846, when he was eleven years old, and Albert I had been subaltern at sixteen. No king had ever started from the rank and file. They were, therefore, greatly surprised to see their leader standing among them beside his eldest boy dressed in a private's uniform.

"Soldiers," he said, "princes must be brought up in the school of duty, and none is better than an army like our own which represents the nation's heroism. My son

has claimed the honour of wearing the uniform of our valiant soldiers. He will be particularly proud to belong to a regiment which, by its deeds of courage and patriotic devotion, deserves to be mentioned in our national history." Then, turning to the Colonel, he added in a lower voice, "Leopold must drill like everyone else. Make him dig in the trenches, so that he may know what it is to have blistered hands."

For six months the future Leopold III served among his comrades before being sent to Eton. While his friends returned home, during the holidays, he went back to La Panne—and to his regiment.

Among the innumerable proofs of the Sovereigns' affection which the soldiers received during the four years spent on the Yser, none touched them so deeply as this unprecedented breach of tradition. The heir to the throne wore a private's uniform, and did a private's work. They knew already that their Commander-in-Chief could be found in the most exposed sectors of the front. They now realized that he wished his own son to share their dangers.

(4) It has been said that King Albert was worshipped by his soldiers. This statement may seem exaggerated to those who know, by personal experience, the scant respect paid, during the Great War, to many superior officers. The prejudice of the front-line man against Headquarters rested on the rash assumption that those who directed operations from the rear lacked the courage or the endurance necessary to bear the nerve-racking experiences of trench life. In his letter to General Leman and in his instructions, the King had emphasized the necessity for commanding officers to share, to some extent, the danger to which their troops were exposed. It was for him part of the leader's duty to give the example and thus to strengthen "the tradition of sacrifice which increases patriotism."

This opinion is questioned by military experts, who argue that the duties of high command are far too exacting to allow a superior officer the leisure to make frequent

inspections of the front line, and to indulge in lengthy conversations with privates. The King, however, did not visit his men for purely sentimental reasons, or on account of his innate love of adventure. He was convinced that by removing the moral barrier existing between those who gave orders, from relatively sheltered quarters, and those who carried them out under the enemy's fire, he was strengthening his army's morale and its power of resistance.

He soon gained the reputation of being one of the most cool-headed and courageous officers at the front. Men who have to fight fear every day of their life grow particularly keen in detecting the slightest symptom of the disease. They never saw him fire a shot, but they witnessed, again and again, his perfect imperturbability while shells were bursting around him. "Without any apparent fear of danger," writes one of them, "without ever losing the simple dignity which characterized him, without the least attempt at swashbuckling, we saw him, from the beginning to the end of the War, the very incarnation of the ideal which we served."<sup>1</sup> The wisdom of his leadership, his constant preoccupation to avoid any unnecessary losses, his firm justice, his keen appreciation of the privates' hardships, the spontaneous tokens of affection and respect he gave them, gradually transformed sheer admiration into a deeper and more exalted feeling.

Whenever circumstances permitted he used to take a ride early in the morning on the shore. He galloped, his cap pulled down, leaning forward on his stirrups, while far behind a panting gendarme, on his cycle, endeavoured to keep pace with him. "When we saw him appear close to the line of foaming breakers," writes Paul Weyemberg, "our platoons faced about and presented arms. Without slackening speed, slightly turning his head, he answered our salute. It was each time as if we made a new vow to him. Our eyes followed his figure for a long time, our pulses quickened and we made fierce and definite resolutions. It

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

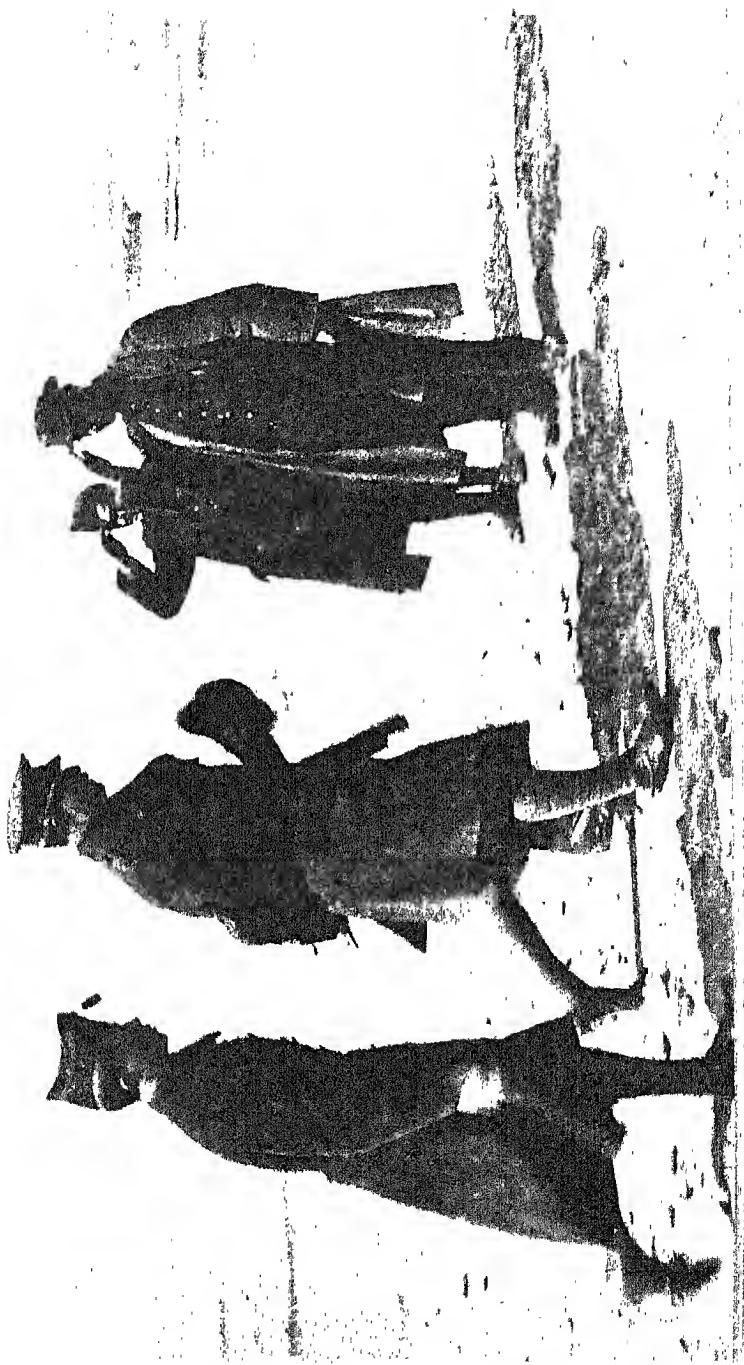
was as if we were closely united with him, every one of us playing his part in the defence of the same cause. In these moments our homes were far away. I was often tormented by feeling this gradual disappearance of familiar images.”<sup>1</sup>

Reading these lines one cannot help thinking of Heine’s Grenadiers: “*Was gilt mir Weib, was gilt mir Kind?*” but there was a world of difference between Napoleon’s romantic veterans and Albert I’s democratic army, between the enthusiastic worshippers of glory and the stubborn defenders of national independence. To win the hearts of the latter needed not only courage and decision, but that spontaneous simplicity and warm-hearted humanity which disarms criticism and silences opposition.

Following orders, the Belgian soldiers never cheered their King, but they managed somehow to show their feelings. On one occasion, having been forewarned of his visit, they collected masses of poppies at the risk of stopping a sniper’s bullet, and profusely decorated their trenches. Another day, as he was asking a few men if they lacked anything, one of them, bolder than the others, replied: “And you, Sire, don’t you want anything?” He answered pensively: “I should like to go back to Brussels,” and pressing closer to him, with eager eyes, they shouted: “Let us take you there.” This after a two years’ war of attrition.

The Belgian soldiers being deprived of correspondence with their families, efforts were made to put them into touch with friends in Allied countries, to whom they could unburden their souls. They were also encouraged to write down their most striking experiences. Both the King and Queen appear through these letters and diaries as benevolent spirits lighting up the shadows of a nightmare. When the confidence in victory becomes fainter and fainter, they remain the chief source of strength. Even if it appears hopeless to fight any longer for Belgium, it is still worth while fighting for them.

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.



c King Albert at La Panne in 1916, walking between Prince Leopold and Prince Charles (Photo Musée de l'Home)

"Equipped like a miner," writes one of these diarists, "my helmet pulled over my ears, the heavy weight of my sack cutting my shoulders, water dripping from my coat down my legs, the cold March rain making me catch my breath, I was walking towards my searchlight post. My three men were trudging along in the same dejected attitude. 'Look, the King!' said one of them. I raised my head. A group of old soldiers engaged in repairing the road dropped their shovels and pickaxes, wiping their brows with their sleeves and sticking their pipes in their pockets. My men face about and the King, smiling, answers our salute. We see him disappear in the pouring rain, splashing like ourselves through the puddles on the road, followed only by one officer. 'I have never saluted so willingly,' said I to my comrades. 'Neither have we,' they answered. 'That puts new heart into me,' said one. 'What a fellow!' said another, 'the first who says anything against him I'll eat him raw!' Stirred by this cheering meeting we were seized with a sort of fever and, scorning the drenching rain, we went on talking until late in the night about our brave Soldier-King. This is still my best memory of the front."<sup>1</sup>

These memories, instead of fading after the War, remained the strongest bond between the veterans. On the day of the last review, almost twenty years later, they turned up, forty thousand strong, some still in uniform, wearing their decorations. They marched past, bare-headed in the dull drizzle, their flags bent forward in a last salute to their beloved chief, as he lay on the gun-carriage, behind a bank of flowers, in front of his Palace. The procession lasted so long that it had to be curtailed. While one side of the street was lined with the new army, the old one lined the other. They stood, shoulder to shoulder, from the Palace to Sainte Gudule, and from Sainte Gudule to Laeken. Three miles of stern, silent men who remembered the Yser.

<sup>1</sup> H. Davignon : *Le Soldat Belge peint par lui-même*, Cahiers Belges, No. 5.

*(B) Reorganization of the Army*

(1) The King's time was divided between military and political work. With Commandant Galet he studied the reorganization of the Army, the defensive works to be undertaken to strengthen the Yser position, while following closely military events on the Western Front. Through his secretary, M. Ingcubleek, he kept in touch with his ministers at Havre, and advised them concerning foreign policy and all important measures of administration.

From December 1914 until the last offensive, the Belgian sector had the reputation of being one of the least dangerous of the Western Front. This opinion was specially popular among those who never visited it. Though no general battle took place until the great offensive, there were a number of minor operations and two important engagements, one at Steenstraat, in connection with the Second Battle of Ypres, in April 1915, and the other at Merckem, caused by the German offensive, three years later.

The flooded area extended only from Nieuport to Dixmude, so that between Nieuport and the sea, and between Dixmude and Ypres, along half of the line ultimately held by the Belgians, their front trenches ran close to those of the Germans, and were exposed to the same raids and attacks as those of the Allies. The inundation did not cover the whole countryside. A number of hamlets and isolated farms emerged, here and there, and were used by Belgians and Germans as observation posts, from which they directed the fire of their artillery. These posts were connected with the front line by a system of footbridges, frequently wrecked by shelling, so that their revictualling was precarious. As the destruction of the Nieuport locks prevented the regulation of the inundation, trenches were frequently flooded by rising water after heavy rains, and breastworks had to be raised to meet this emergency.

Owing to the sodden condition of the ground, the troops could not dig themselves in along the Yser as in the other

sectors of the Western Front. All defence works had therefore to be built up by using innumerable sandbags and, even in the front line, the men were constantly employed in restoring their trenches by filling and piling up these "sacs à terre." It was a constant joke amongst them that if the War lasted much longer they would put their whole country into sacks; the Flemings called them "*Vaderlandjes*." These ramparts were not proof against violent bombardment, and it was almost impossible to rebuild them under heavy shell-fire, so that sometimes the men were practically without cover.

In spite of its relatively quiet character the Belgian front could not be held without heavy losses. These are estimated at no less than 40,000, for an army averaging 150,000 men, from December 1914 to August 1918.

(2) The first work to which King Albert devoted his attention was recruiting.

After the Battle of the Yser the army was left without reserves, apart from 18,000 volunteers who had joined the colours at the outbreak of hostilities, and the men of the 1914 class.

The King decided to reinforce his troops by using the resources available in independent Flanders, Great Britain and France. A first decree, issued in March 1915, called on all Belgians under twenty-five. In July 1916, men under forty years of age became liable for active or auxiliary service. The available reserve was further increased by 25,000 volunteers who succeeded at great risk in escaping from occupied Belgium through the cordon of sentries guarding the northern frontier, which was closed by a barrier of electrified wire.

No less than 120,000 Belgians joined the colours during the War, in spite of the German occupation of eight provinces out of nine. The Field Army was raised to 130,000 in 1916 and 150,000 in 1917, and the King was able to assist the Allied commanders by extending his front

from thirteen to twenty-four miles, and gradually taking over the sector extending from Dixmude towards Ypres.<sup>1</sup>

For a short time, after the Battle of the Yser, the Belgians were dependent on Allied help with regard to guns, ammunition and equipment. Important orders were immediately placed abroad and a number of workshops and factories established in France and England to supply the need of the army. Aware of the shortage of guns and ammunition which made itself felt in all the countries engaged in the War, the King was anxious to make Belgium self-supporting. In his decree of August 16th 1915, he urged that the Belgians should "only ask from the Allies what they could not manufacture themselves," and an appeal was made to all Belgian engineers and skilled labourers. In 1917 the number of men employed in the national factories reached 22,000. By that time the Belgians were producing their own ammunition (with the exception of heavy shells), their own rifles, their field-guns and trench-mortars. It was, in M. Vandervelde's words, "a grand improvisation . . . one of the most remarkable manifestations of Belgian industrial genius."

The same spirit of initiative and self-reliance was shown with regard to the Commissariat. The soldiers were soon provided with bread and beer from their own bakeries and breweries. In 1915 the old uniforms were replaced by khaki, and "military shops" were organized close to the front, where the men could buy at cost price any small "extra" they might require; they proved all the more successful as no parcels were received from home. During the darkest days which followed the Battle of the Yser, this sore need of "comforts" had been supplied, to a certain extent, by Allied friends, but the King did not wish his soldiers to be dependent on these generous gifts. In spite of his deep gratitude for the sympathy shown to his army, he realized that a time would soon come when the resources of each nation would be absorbed by their own

<sup>1</sup> Tasnier et van Overstraeten: *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. III.

needs. Some well-intentioned compatriots having launched an appeal in the British Press, which received a most touching response, he informed the public through a friend that the military authorities had taken all necessary measures and that the re-equipment of his army was proceeding rapidly.

From the beginning of the campaign the nursing of the wounded had been the Queen's special care. The fall of Antwerp caused a critical situation. The 9000 wounded in the town had been removed to Ostend, where several thousand had already been conveyed from Ghent and other places. It soon became evident that they could not remain there without being captured by the enemy and, thanks to the prompt action of British and French authorities, they were shipped to England and to the French coast on October 13th and 14th.

The Battle of the Yser brought matters to a climax. More than 12,000 wounded had to be removed to Dunkirk or Calais. These towns were far too distant for dangerous cases. From the end of October, a series of field hospitals were established close to the front in West Flanders, the most important being *l'Hôpital de l'Océan* at La Panne, which was visited almost daily by the Queen. Thanks to the numerous gifts they received, the Sovereigns were able gradually to increase the number and size of these hospitals and to improve their equipment. The results obtained were most gratifying. It is estimated that out of 200,000 cases, only 10,000 proved fatal; the large majority were thus able to return to the front. Queen Elisabeth's influence on hospital staffs was the counterpart of King Albert's on his soldiers. Her readiness to accept the boldest suggestions stimulated the initiative of the doctors in charge, and her energy proved an inexhaustible source of comfort to the nurses.

Next to the wounded, the children were the Queen's chief concern. A large number of civilians, reluctant to leave their houses, had remained for months close to the

front and were constantly exposed to shell-fire. Alarmed at the number of casualties, in August 1915, the Queen urged on the authorities the necessity of evacuating hundreds of small children from the danger zone. The parents were told either to take refuge in France with their families or to send their children to some school prepared for them. The school of Vinckem, founded by Queen Elisabeth, had already no less than 400 children under fourteen years of age belonging to the surrounding villages, and could not accommodate more. It was found necessary to send some of the older children as far as Switzerland. Whenever the Sovereigns felt the strain of war they sought refuge among the babes at Vinckem.<sup>1</sup>

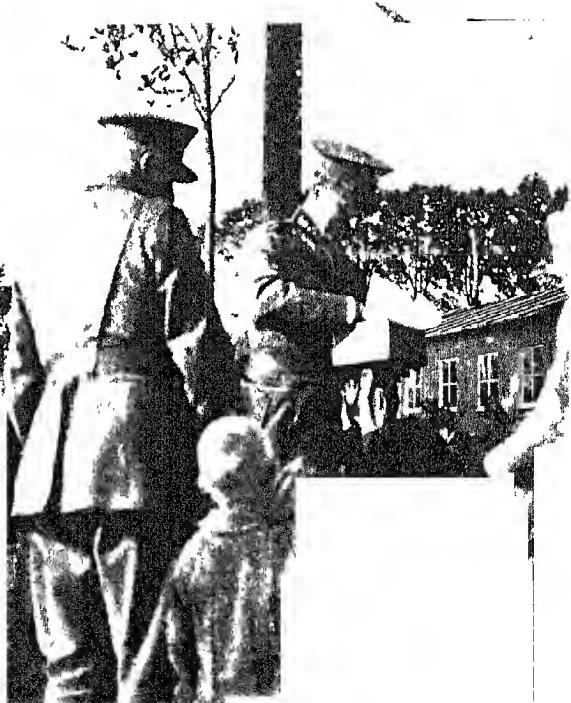
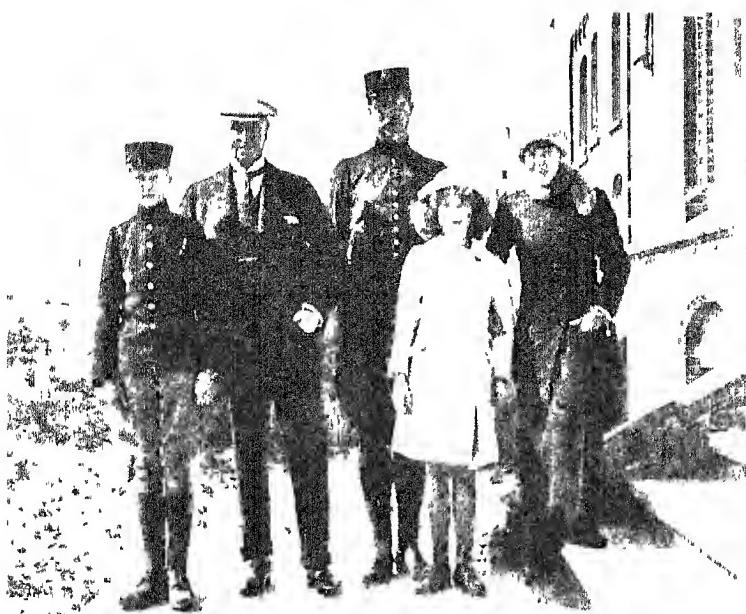
The Queen frequently undertook rounds of visits accompanied only by her military chauffeur. On one occasion a nurse, on her way to hospital, stopped a car on the road and was thrown into confusion when she recognized its occupant: "I hope the Queen will forgive me. . . ." — "There is no Queen here, Madame," she answered, "only two women who suffer and see others suffer."<sup>2</sup>

(3) During these four years of waiting King Albert remained faithful to the policy which inspired all his decisions from the beginning of the campaign, and which seemed to him the only one consistent with his constitutional responsibility. He answered the requests of the Allies by extending his front towards the south, as soon as the reorganization of his troops allowed him to do so, by maintaining constant pressure on the German sector opposed to his, and by repulsing all the enemy's attacks. But he firmly declined to take part in any offensive operation which appeared to him unwarranted by circumstances or inspired by political motives.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See pl. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. King Albert's answer to his gardener, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Witness his answers to the French on November 22nd 1914, May 27th 1917, April 12th 1918; and to Sir John French in December 1914. He also refused to send a Belgian Division to Italy in November 1917.



S King Albert distributing toys to the school children at Ypres during the War

Above a group showing Prince Leopold, Lord Glamorgan, King Albert, Princess Marie Louise and Queen Elisabeth (The Prince 1915)

From April 22nd to May 1st 1915, the Belgians helped to restore the situation caused by the German gas attack launched by the enemy north of Ypres. This heavy engagement in the region of Steenstraat cost the army 1500 men.

When, in May 1917, the Commander-in-Chief was asked to co-operate in the Allied offensive in Flanders which had been prepared by Sir Douglas Haig and General Pétain, he answered by a strong note, pointing out the dangers of the plan and his unwillingness to sacrifice his men in an enterprise which did not meet with his approval:

*Since the King has had no opportunity, in previous consultations, to express an opinion on the operation to which the Belgian Army is asked to take part, he feels obliged to give his advice. . . .*

*He considers that the operation has no chance of success, because, owing to the weakness of military activity on the Eastern Front, the enemy has never been able to concentrate so many units on the Western Front. An attempt to break through has besides been made recently with over a hundred Divisions on ground favourable for an attack. This attempt having failed, it is scarcely to be hoped that the projected operation could succeed with inferior forces and on ground far less favourable and which can be partially inundated.*

*The invasion of the greatest part of Belgian territory and the lack of reserves resulting from it, besides the King's duty to prevent any useless losses among his men, would compel him to decline all participation in an operation which, according to his opinion, is bound to fail.*

*However, in order to maintain harmony between the Allied Armies, if they persist in their resolution, he is prepared to agree to the co-operation of the Belgian Army under the following conditions.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *Revue Belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre*, May-September 1934

The first condition was that the Army should remain under his exclusive command; the second that the French should take over part of the sector occupied, at the time, by his troops; and the third, that the Belgians should only debouch from Dixmude as soon as the progress realized by the British had rendered their intervention advisable.

The offensive towards Messines and Wytschaete developed satisfactorily, but the Germans succeeded in checking the advance at Passchendaele in November. The Belgians and the British Divisions massed round Nieuport since August were, therefore, not called upon to participate in the operations.<sup>1</sup>

Once more the hopes previously raised by the Allied plans in Champagne and on the Somme were doomed to disappointment; the struggle ended in a stalemate.

As early as September 1915, the King had given formal instructions that the Belgian front must be rendered inviolable, even if this involved an exceptional effort from the men. When others hoped for the best, he prepared for the worst, well knowing the exceptional resources of the enemy in men and material. A second line of defences was built about a mile behind the Nieuport-Dixmude railway and a third along the Loo Canal, south of Furnes. Concrete works replaced the sandbags in the most exposed sections of the front trenches, and a network of railways of a total length of 140 miles was built in West Flanders. Thousands of men belonging to the auxiliary services were constantly employed on the improvement and upkeep of these works. In 1918 the army, 170,000 strong, powerfully equipped with guns and aircraft, was established in an almost impregnable position. The enemy's spring offensive, following the Russian collapse, showed that these precautions were fully justified.<sup>2</sup>

This offensive became particularly critical in Flanders

<sup>1</sup> On July 11th, a touching ceremony took place at Houthem, when General Plumer restored to King Albert the bell found by the British troops among the ruins of Wytschaete Church.

<sup>2</sup> *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. III.

in April when, after the advance at Armentières, the enemy threatened the Ypres Salient. Ludendorff intended to repeat on the Salient the tactics which had been successful at Tannenberg. According to his plan, the German forces in Flanders were to attack simultaneously north and south of Ypres, in order to break through the Allied front, turn the position of the Yser and reach the Channel ports. All preparations had been made when, on April 16th, the German Command heard of the sudden retirement of the British Second Army and of the Belgian 4th Division on a new position. This move, by strengthening the defence, upset the enemy's calculations, but the attack was nevertheless launched on the 17th in the sector of Bailleul and in that of Langemarck. The main purpose of the latter operation was to break through at the junction of the British and Belgian Armies. Its failure was due to the foresight of the British Command and to the careful preparations made in the Belgian sector.<sup>1</sup>

The front between Mercken and Langemarck was held by units belonging to the 3rd and 4th Divisions. It had been gradually taken over from the French First Army and the British Second Army, between November 1917 and March 1918, and had not yet been properly organized. In detailed instructions issued on March 22nd, King Albert had informed the commanding officers that they should, in case of attack, evacuate the advance-posts and concentrate their resistance on their second line. The Belgian artillery had also been warned to take full advantage of this move. The Commander-in-Chief's preparations proved adequate, and when the attack was launched, the Belgian troops opposed such determined resistance that the enemy's advance was completely checked. Through a series of counter-attacks the line was nearly re-established during the afternoon. The German offensive on the British, north of Ypres and towards Kemmel, met with scant result and, after much hesitation, the German commanders were

<sup>1</sup> See sketch IV.

obliged to give up the "Tanneuenberg Plan" and to turn their attention to Rheims and the Marne. This was the first success which the Allies were able to register after the series of reverses experienced during the spring.

King Albert was highly gratified by the result achieved. Though only a fraction of his troops had been engaged he realized that the patient effort pursued during the last years had borne fruit. Now that they were well-organized and well-supported by their artillery, his men had shown themselves equal to those of the best units of the Allied Armies with which they co-operated. A few battalions had succeeded in repulsing a determined attack, taking 760 prisoners and losing only 670 men. He could henceforth rest confident. His soldiers had learned their trade, and national honour was safe in their hands.

King George, in a telegram, congratulated him on the "splendid success of his troops," and General Pershing on the "heroic resistance opposed by the Belgian Army" to the enemy's attack.

### (C) *News from Belgium*

In spite of all obstacles, news from Brussels and other towns reached Havre and La Parne from time to time. They were brought either by special couriers who managed to slip to and fro across the Dutch frontier, or by Belgian citizens who succeeded in going to Holland and thence to London and the French coast. Respectable bourgeois used the most daring and ingenious devices in order to smuggle across the frontier important reports on the German administration and on the condition of the population. This information was so complete that those who received it in England and France could appreciate the situation of the country as well, if not better, than many of their compatriots in Belgium, who could only travel with great difficulty. The comparison of the literature published after the War by many writers who patiently gathered their facts during the four years of occupation, and most

books and articles which appeared abroad during the same period, reveals no serious discrepancy. This is true not only of the first months of the invasion when contact was maintained through the Belgian coast, but also of later events which occurred when German occupation was fully organized and when all intercourse seemed to have ceased between Belgium and the rest of the world.

(1) The King was thus fully aware of the patient resistance of his people to an insidious propaganda, and to the various attempts made to undermine their loyalty. If, during the dark days of the Antwerp retreat, he had ever entertained any doubt concerning the reaction provoked by the military reverses he had suffered, such forebodings were soon to be dispelled. The Belgians never admitted that their Government had ceased to exist, and that their allegiance was due to the foreign officials imposed upon them by force. The fact that independent territory had been reduced to a few square miles did not affect their belief that, in law, the Belgian State and Constitution remained whole.

Before the fall of Antwerp, the movements of troops caused by the two sorties had convinced them that the fight waged for their liberation by the national army was not abandoned. Even after the retreat they could sometimes hear the distant sound of the Yser guns brought by the western wind. They felt the presence of their King as if he had still dwelt among them. Once more a fine reality grew into a pathetic legend. Since it was forbidden to exhibit publicly the King or the Queen's pictures, they were displayed in every home, and medallions with their portraits were worn concealed like talismans. Albert and Elisabeth became the most popular saints in the calendar, and the patrons of a large number of War babies.

The bitter resentment caused by this secret worship to the German authorities is shown by the strict regulations they made in order to prevent it, and the disproportionate penalties they inflicted. Close to Lierre, on July 21st 1916,

on the occasion of the national feast, some Belgian patriots hoisted their flag to the top of a tree on which they had nailed the portraits of the Sovereigns. As a punishment the inhabitants were confined to their houses after 9 p.m., and ten notable citizens were imprisoned until the full payment by the Commune of a fine of 20,000 marks. This sentence was justified on the ground that the authors of the misdeeds had attempted murder by sawing the branches of the tree "so that the German soldiers who hauled down the flag were compelled to do so at the risk of their lives."<sup>1</sup>

All means were used to undermine the people's loyalty. Certain German papers, such as the *Düsseldorfer General-Anzeiger* and the *Réveil*, started a campaign denouncing King Albert as the "arch-conspirator," the "slave of England," the "instigator" of the Belgian atrocities committed at Dinant and Louvain. According to the pamphlet *Lüttich*, he had opposed the German advance for fear of a "Walloon revolution" and, after being left in the lurch by his "friends," was now prevented by them from concluding peace. These accusations were reproduced by the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the German papers published in Belgium.

In the early months of the War, a rumour spread according to which the Sovereigns had left the Belgian front and settled in England. Later, in the spring of 1916, it was reported in Holland, among the refugees, that they had betrayed the Allies, and that the Queen had met some German agent in Switzerland. This calumny reached even some French and British units on the Western Front, and M. Poincaré made a point of paying a visit to La Panne on July 22nd in order to show that Franco-Belgian friendship remained unimpaired.<sup>2</sup> The fury provoked by the failure of these manœuvres drove Governor von Bissing to extremes. Did he not hint in his "political testament" that murder might be the surest method to remove the man who,

<sup>1</sup> Pirenne: *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale*.

<sup>2</sup> Poincaré: *Au Service de la France*.

more than any other, stood in the way of his country's annexationist policy?<sup>1</sup>

Such attacks could but exasperate the people's blind devotion. Their mystic enthusiasm is expressed in an anonymous pamphlet written in imitation of Pascal's well-known *Lettres Provinciales*, and circulated secretly during the occupation.

In one of these "letters" a friend asks an old magistrate, the Conseiller Eudoxe, why the Belgians keep on smiling through their trials. Eudoxe answers that Belgium smiles through her tears like Andromache who, when parting from Hector before his last fight, wept because she knew that he was condemned by the oracle, but smiled, thinking of the immortal glory which he was going to win. The following passage is typical of the kind of prophetic exaltation which carried away most Belgians, and sustained them through the following years. It was only by over-emphasizing the part which their country was playing that they could endure their fate: "Belgium was there, on the threshold of war, barring the way to barbarism; condemning herself to death for the defence of her violated right and the safeguard of her honour. Rising from the first day to the highest pinnacle of sacrifice, she has given to the War of Nations a character which will be preserved by history: the wild rush of Force against Right. Her heroic and disinterested action, scorning Machiavellism and the 'Reason of State,' has taught the world that there is only one morality and that, like individuals, nations must lead an honest life. She has awakened the conscience of the peoples. Her cause has become that of the civilized world, and the Allied cause has been transformed into a holy crusade against the enemies of honour, right and freedom. Belgium has given this war its nobility. She has done more. Before dying she has stopped the invasion in front of Liège, Antwerp and the Yser: that is why she smiles, not without pride, because she dies as a soldier of honour and right for

<sup>1</sup> *Das Grossere Deutschland*, May 1917.

civilization, and sees herself ennobled for ever in the memory of men. . . . She also smiles thinking of the one who, far away, beyond the Yser among the garland of dunes swept by the wind, still maintains his rule on a shred of country drenched with the blood of heroes. For he is for her the hope of the future. Some men are only made great by the greatness of the events with which they are associated; he will preserve his greatness after the tide of history has died at his feet. When, on August 2nd 1914, he devoted his sword to honour; when on the Yser he devoted himself to valour, in an absurd, heroic and sublime attempt to stop the onrush of the most formidable army the world has ever known with a handful of conquered and exhausted soldiers—altering twice the course of history—this man achieved greatness, as much as any man can achieve it in his perishable days. Germany and Austria, with their abject Hohenzollern and treacherous Hapsburg, will have sunk for centuries in the ignominious wreckage of their Kultur, when the glory of Albert, Sovereign of a few fields, King of Furnes and of twenty clock-towers will still throb, vivid and luminous, like a beautiful star on the proudest summit of human conscience.”<sup>1</sup>

In the autumn of 1918, when the Americans broke through the German front in the sectors of Saint Mihiel they were met by a group of Flemish civilians who had been compelled to work behind the lines. Their first cry, when brought before the Belgian officer attached to American Headquarters, was: “The King! How is the King?”<sup>2</sup>

(2) The Sovereign had only a few opportunities during the weeks spent in Antwerp to confer with the popular leaders who had decided to remain in the country. He had, nevertheless, a last interview with Cardinal Mercier, in the course of which the latter promised him not only to watch over his flock but to champion the rights of the whole

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres d'un Provincial ou les Propos du Conseiller Eudoxe* (Van Oest, 1919).

<sup>2</sup> *Informations Belges*, No. 801, September 4th 1918.

population. Monseigneur Mercier kept his word, encouraging the people in their passive resistance and strengthening their faith in a happy issue of their trials. He advised them, at the same time, not to indulge in vain demonstrations which would only be used by the authorities as a pretext for further oppression.

In his pastoral letter of January 1st 1915, he insisted on the necessity of submitting to the inevitable, and on the distinction to be made between true courage and reckless bravado; but he declared that the duty of all Belgians was to remain faithful to their King and their laws, and that the power exerted by the invader being "illegitimate" deserved "neither esteem, nor loyalty, nor respect." This letter and several others were read not only in every church in the land, in spite of German strict prohibition, but in every café, in every home. No less than twelve editions in French and Flemish were printed and circulated secretly. Without distinction of creed or class the Belgians accepted the spiritual leadership of the "Great Cardinal." Every church became a sanctuary of patriotism. It was the only place where they could hear of their King and where the *Brabançonne* could be played.

The same policy of steadfast resistance was pursued by the civil authorities, and more particularly by the burgomasters of the Belgian Communes, who being nominated by the King were his acknowledged representatives in all local affairs. The prestige of local authorities is a special feature of the Belgian Constitution, and an inheritance of mediæval times when the Communes played such an important part in the history of the Netherlands. Ignorant of this fact, the Germans were surprised and indignant when they found that the departure of the King and his Government from the Capital had not left the people helpless.

A strong lead was given by Burgomaster Max who, instead of submitting without discussion to the orders of the German generals after their spectacular entry into Brussels, questioned their legality and contradicted publicly

some German proclamations. In one of his posters, M. Max advised his fellow-citizens to haul down the national flags according to German regulations and to "wait with patience the hour of reparation." In another, dated August 30th 1914, he opposed "the most positive denial" to a notice published by the German Governor of Liège, according to which lie, M. Max, had informed the German authorities that the French Government had admitted the impossibility of assisting the Belgian Army in offensive operations. After a particularly heated discussion concerning the payment of a fine of 50,000,000 francs which the Germans wished to exact from the Capital, M. Max was finally arrested and deported to a German prison. The authorities were greatly mistaken if they imagined that their action could overcome the stubborn resistance with which they were confronted in every town and village. Burgomaster Max became a martyr, a hero of civic loyalty, as Cardinal Mercier was the symbol of spiritual resistance, and his example was followed by a number of local magistrates who suffered the same penalty for defending the rights of their fellow-citizens.

Thanks to the warning given by the leaders of public opinion, no credence was attached to the account of the sweeping victories, in the East as well as in the West, which were proudly recorded by the German placards during the first months of the occupation. This news, which was reproduced by a few papers issued or subsidized by the German authorities, was so grossly exaggerated that it was scorned by the vast majority who entertained an over-optimistic view of the course of events. It was still believed, in 1915, that the War would be over in a few weeks, and preparations were even made for the organization of a World Fair to be held in Brussels to celebrate the Allies' victory. The number of those who could obtain more accurate information from English and Dutch papers was strictly limited.

Belgian patriotism was further stimulated by the deep misunderstanding which was bound to arise between an

army of disciplined soldiers and officials who believed blindly in the perfection of the centralized State which they served, and an easy-going population, proud of its liberties and resenting bitterly the petty persecutions to which it was subjected. Between the Belgians and the Germans began a battle of wits similar to those waged by schoolboys against unpopular masters. The national colours being prohibited, ladies managed to introduce them in their hats or dresses, and men, instead of black, yellow and red, wore a green leaf in their buttonholes. Since shops and restaurants could no longer decorate their windows on the occasion of the National Fête, they remained obstinately shut. These demonstrations prompted a succession of decrees which provoked some merriment. One of them prohibited "all concerted demonstrations, manifesting themselves in special insignias or colour-schemes exhibited in costumes, or by closing of shops, restaurants, etc." The total lack of humour and understanding shown by the German authorities, their useless inspection of schools and homes, the numberless and often purposeless regulations which fettered the movements of every man and woman, prevented any possible compromise between conquerors and conquered. Instead of curbing the people's pride, the frequent condemnations of patriots exasperated antagonism. The effect produced in Belgium by the 300 executions which took place during the occupation may be gauged by the impression caused in Britain and the United States at the news of the death of Nurse Cavell. All suspected of procuring information, of helping men to cross the frontier, or circulating forbidden literature, were subjected to a regular inquisition, and denunciation was made compulsory, even among members belonging to the same family.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the violation of Belgian neutrality, and the excesses of the invasion, it might still have been possible to call a truce, pending the result of military operations, if the Germans had shown some moderation in their requisitions

<sup>1</sup> Pirenne, *op. cit.*

and regulations, without interfering with the citizens' private lives; but they remained convinced that they could break Belgian loyalty by numberless fines, decrees and executions. The challenge was accepted; the number of those who fell under the German bullets and lingered in German prisons increased every month. The climax was reached in 1916, when the authorities decreed the mass deportation of Belgian workers.

(3) Thanks to the information which reached him from time to time, King Albert could follow step by step the course of events which brought this new tragedy on his people.

In an industrial country like Belgium, importing 70 per cent. of the wheat consumed and most of the raw material used by its industries, the blockade which followed immediately on the German invasion must necessarily have provoked disastrous consequences. All foreign markets, with the exception of Holland, were closed, transports paralysed, and economic activity brought to a stand-still. Stocks and other resources were soon requisitioned by the Germans. As early as March 1915, according to the estimate of the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce, the value of such requisitions amounted to 85 million francs. Without warning, the country was suddenly threatened with famine.

While in Antwerp, King Albert had heard of the initiative taken by the *Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation* organized in Brussels, under the presidency of Ernest Solvay, working in close collaboration with Burgomaster Max and Emile Francqui. He realized only too well the difficulties which stood in the way. In all belligerent countries the revictualling of the population came sooner or later under the control of the State. To what extent was Germany able or willing to feed, in this time of crisis, seven million strangers whom she counted among her bitterest enemies? Talking to Belgians, German soldiers had frequently remarked that if they were condemned to

perish at the front, the Belgians were condemned to die of hunger.

Obviously, the food required should be imported but, even if sufficient supplies were procured, how could the Committee give the Allied Powers, and especially Great Britain, the assurance that these imports would in no way profit the enemy, and be consumed only in occupied Belgium? Their first step was to obtain the patronage of the American, Spanish and Dutch Ministers, who had remained in Brussels. They succeeded, a few weeks later, in enlisting the sympathies of Herbert Hoover and of W. H. Page, the American Ambassador in London. The former accepted the Presidency of the "Commission for Relief in Belgium," on October 22nd 1914, and the latter, through his Government at Washington, succeeded in obtaining from the Foreign Office that the Commission's imports would be allowed to pass through the blockade on their way to Rotterdam. The organization was placed under the patronage of the representatives of the Neutral Powers who guaranteed to the British Government that its cargoes would be exclusively used for the revictualling of the Belgian population.

During the two first months of their existence, the Commission for Relief and the *Comité National*, which undertook the distribution of goods in Belgium, acted on their own initiative and were abundantly supplied with gifts in kind and money by a large number of committees established in the United States, Great Britain, the Dominions and several neutral countries. From January 1915 the Belgian Government granted a subsidy of 25 million francs a month, which was considerably raised two years later. In this vital matter, as in the case of comforts given to his soldiers, King Albert did not wish to be dependent on foreign help. He considered that the Belgian State was responsible for the welfare of the people, and should devote to relief-work part of the loans granted by the Allies.

The importance taken by the Commission for Relief

could scarcely be foreseen in these early days. Its fleet of 2313 ships brought to Belgium no less than 5,174,431 tons of goods during the five years of its activity. Though a large number of Belgians, especially in the towns, endured severe privations, the revictualling of the country allowed them to retain a certain independence and not to be placed in the alternative of starving or consenting to work for the enemy. If the Germans had realized from the first the extraordinary authority which the *Comité National* under M. Francqui would soon acquire, they would perhaps have hesitated before allowing its organization. Their decision was prompted by the urgent necessity of avoiding famine and the riots it would have necessarily provoked, at a time when the fate of the Reich was being settled on the battle-fields of France.

The work of the Commission was particularly difficult, for its success depended entirely on the loyalty of a small army of 125,000 volunteers, and it possessed no legal power to enforce its decisions. It acted as a purely private association and could only rely, when difficulties arose with the German administration, on the support of the neutral Ministers in Brussels. In February 1916 the central committee was obliged to issue a warning to the provincial centres against sales made, not to private people for their personal need, but to merchants who traded with Germany. The notice included a strong hint that if such leakages continued Great Britain would withdraw the facilities she had granted. This threat was enough to stop further abuse. Difficulties also occurred with the authorities who, owing to the scarcity of food which was already felt in Germany, endeavoured to evade the promise made in 1914 not to requisition foodstuffs in Belgium. This provoked an unavoidable reaction in London, since such a move would have provided Germany with a new source of supplies. The situation became so alarming that King Albert wrote a personal letter to King George asking him to use his influence to prevent a hasty decision, which would have

spelled disaster for Belgium. After anxious negotiations and thanks to the firm intervention of the neutral Ministers in Brussels, a convention was concluded with the German authorities on April 14th 1916, in which the previous undertakings were maintained and confirmed.<sup>1</sup>

(4) No sooner was King Albert reassured with regard to the future of the Commission's work, than he experienced fresh anxiety concerning the systematic exploitation to which Belgium was being subjected.

The first requisitions under Governor von der Goltz had a purely military character; but under Governor von Bissing, who replaced him in December 1914, far more systematic methods were adopted. These had been carefully planned by a German expert, Walther Rathenau, and aimed at tapping every source of supply through the organizing of purchasing centres, or *Zentrale*. Such centres were soon established for coal, oil, sugar, copper, wool and other materials required by German industry, and Belgium was gradually drained of all its resources. Demands in cash were besides out of all proportion to the country's means, a war contribution of 40 million francs per month being raised, in 1916, to 50 million, and later to 60 million. Governor von Bissing, who represented the civil administration, warned German industrialists of the danger of increasing unduly the burden of such payments. "A pressed lemon," he declared, in June 1915, "is of no value, and a dead cow does not give any milk." Germany's true interest was not to exhaust the country's capital, but to help if possible to restore industrial activity.

Meanwhile, the number of unemployed reached 650,000 in 1915, more than 50 per cent. of the industrial population, and over a million people, ruined by the War, were without any means of existence. Both the Communes and the *Comité National* endeavoured to cope with this critical situation, the former by subsidizing public works, the latter

<sup>1</sup> Pirenne, *op. cit.*

by giving relief in coupons and in kind, and by providing the unemployed with some useful occupation by the organization of lectures and reading clubs. At first, the German administration did not look askance upon this activity. It was obviously in its interest that the Belgian workers should remain calm and that no disturbance should take place. But, as soon as the shortage of men, and especially of skilled workers, was felt in Germany, unemployment became a sore point with military leaders, and strong measures were taken to exploit Belgian labour, as well as Belgian resources.

Apart from a few factories which had been sequestered after the invasion, Germany did not draw any serious advantage from Belgian industrial activity. With the exception of coal-mines, the latter was now adjusted to home consumption, and practically all attempts made to place orders which directly or indirectly would benefit the invader failed before the resistance of employers and employees. In June 1915, an *Industriebüro* started an active propaganda in order to enlist the services of Belgian workmen for Germany. In spite of tempting offers, and of assurances given that the men would not be employed on military work, the results achieved proved negligible.

In order to stimulate enlistment, Governor von Bissing issued a decree in August, inflicting fines and imprisonment on those who benefited from relief and refused suitable work. No appreciable results being achieved, the Governor was obliged to give way to the pressing demands of Headquarters who wished to raise in Belgium an army of 400,000 workers. As it would be impossible to compel them to work in Belgium, they would have to be distributed through Germany. No legal or moral consideration could weigh against "military necessity." Victory depended on Germany's industrial production.

Once more the principle *Not kennt kein Gebot* was proclaimed, and once more the civil authorities submitted to the will of the military. The Governor issued two decrees, on May 2nd and 15th 1916. The first, by placing public

works under German control, considerably increased the number of unemployed. The second legalized forced labour and allowed the military and civil authorities to remove the recalcitrants from their homes and bring them to "the places where they must work." However ruthless, these measures did not yet imply transportation abroad. Von Bissing, who disapproved of the plan, opposed it to the end, appealing to the Kaiser himself, but the Hindenburg-Ludendorff policy prevailed and, on September 28th, it was finally decided that the unemployed should either sign an engagement to work in Germany or be forcibly deported to that country.

The measure was immediately applied in the war zone, where no serious efforts were made to discriminate between unemployed and employed, those who were dependent on relief and those who were not. In the part of Belgium under civil authority, the Governor was faced with the determined opposition of the Communes who refused to deliver the lists of *chômeurs*. At the end of October he gave up all hope of applying the decree with any measure of humanity, and orders were given to seize at random the required number of men among those who refused to sign a regular engagement. Workmen, bourgeois, students were indiscriminately conveyed between two rows of soldiers to the next railway station and often sent in cattle-trucks to some unknown destination. The soldiery acted with unnecessary brutality, and husbands and sons were frequently prevented from taking leave of their families.

Four and a half months later, when the Kaiser finally decided to suspend the deportations, 60,000 men had been removed to Germany; about 1200 of them lost their lives in labour camps. The mortality among the *Zivil Arbeiter Bataillone* raised in the war zone and compelled sometimes to work under fire, was still heavier. It is estimated at 2614 (over 4 per cent.). Altogether 120,000 workers, instead of 400,000, were raised in Belgium. The labour which they were compelled to do, during these few months, scarcely

compensated Germany for the indignation aroused all over the world by the deportations and for their political consequences.<sup>1</sup>

(5) In Belgium the measure roused a storm of protests. As early as October 19th, Cardinal Mercier sent a letter to the Governor, begging him to put a stop to a measure which violated the sanctuary of home, the freedom to work, and the "highest moral interests" of mankind. He reminded him of the formal promises made, in the early days of occupation, by Governor von der Goltz that the citizens' liberty should be respected. In another letter, he described the impression produced by the deportations: "Two years ago, it was death, pillage, arson, but it was war! What we witness to-day is not war, but cold calculation, premeditated action, Force crushing Right, the debasement of human personality, a challenge to humanity." The Cardinal's lead was followed by socialist and non-socialist trade unions, deputies and senators, bishops and freemasons, provincial and communal authorities, judges and university professors. Never before had all creeds, all classes, all parties, all professions been so unanimous. Von Bissing could only repeat in self-defence the very argument which had been put forward by military headquarters, and which he had himself vainly opposed a few weeks before.

To be properly appreciated, the violation of Belgian neutrality required a certain knowledge of history and international law; the massacres of August 1914 could be explained, to a certain extent, by the morbid fear of the *francs-tireurs*; but the deportations were, in the eyes of the people, the most abominable act of cold-blooded cruelty ever perpetrated in modern history. The news of each fresh "razzia" inflicted a fresh wound to all Belgians, whether at home or abroad. No one felt it so deeply as the King himself.

One of his best airmen has related the story of a flight

<sup>1</sup> Pirenne: *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale*, pp. 192-197.

he made, during the last months of the War, over the enemy's lines. His old Farman, accompanied by a squadron of fighting planes, was greeted by German anti-aircraft guns and, after wandering over West Flanders at a height of 12,000 feet, returned safely to its aerodrome. In the distant haze, the King had seen the red roofs of Bruges and, further still, the mouth of the Scheldt, between Terneuzen and Walcheren; every detail of the German lines from the sea to Ypres, appeared clearly mapped out. Beyond that barrier, "the country" as he fondly called it, awaited patiently the hour of liberation. Did this sight bring him comfort or pain? The pilot could not tell. He could only see his passenger's body leaning forward as if his life was thrust towards these villages and fields, where thousands of his subjects were compelled to work, exposed to the fire of their own army.<sup>1</sup>

(6) The most cruel news which reached King Albert from occupied territory concerned the attempts made by the enemy to divide his people against itself and break up the unity of the Belgian State.

This policy was started by the military authorities in the war zone—*Etappengebiet*—which included the two provinces of Flanders. As soon as it became evident that Belgium would play an important part in the peace discussions, the Germans used every means at their disposal to undermine the loyalty of the population.

In their ignorance of history, the officers who prompted this campaign believed that a nation in which two languages were spoken could not possess any genuine patriotism. The Belgian State was for them, not the result of the close association of Flemings and Walloons, strengthened by centuries of common tradition, but the artificial creation of nineteenth-century diplomacy. Being themselves full of

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934. These flights were repeated by both Sovereigns during the hostilities. The King made also several ascents in Belgian observation balloons. On one occasion, in 1917, his balloon was attacked by an enemy airman.

racial and linguistic prejudices they made no distinction between nationality and language. The Flemings, they thought, must necessarily be sympathetic to Germanism, since their speech was Germanic. They had been subjected to Walloon and French supremacy, just as the Poles, in their own Empire, and the Czechs and Slavs, in Austria, were subjected to German hegemony. Since Germany possessed the power to favour separatism and to silence opposition, it would be easy for her to "liberate" Flanders and bring it gradually into her fold. The Flemings, it is true, had hitherto shown as little inclination as the Walloons to fraternize with their conquerors, but this was, no doubt, the result of the strong measures "necessitated by the War"; their resentment would soon be pacified by gentler and more diplomatic methods.

In the spring of 1915, the German authorities in Ghent succeeded with the help of a few discontented Flemings in starting a propaganda which was greeted with enthusiasm by the German Press. Every meeting, protected by the German police, every article of the *Vlaamsche Post*—the organ of the new party—was given wide publicity, and it was urged that the aspirations of the "oppressed Flemings" should be encouraged. In April 1915, in the Reichstag, the Chancellor promised his support and, as the progress of the movement proved discouraging in spite of lavish subsidies, it was decided to propitiate the Flemings by proceeding with the reform of the University of Ghent.

A Bill introducing the use of the Flemish language had been before the Belgian Parliament previous to the outbreak of War, and the German authorities hoped that, by exerting pressure on the professors, they might persuade them to resume their lectures under the new régime. Meeting with an almost unanimous refusal, they decided to make an example by deporting Professors Pirenne and Frédéricq to a German prison-camp. The Governor decreed, in March 1916, that the Flemish University of Ghent would start activities in the following October. The acknowledged

leaders of the Flemish movement, unable to protest publicly owing to the censorship, signed a declaration which was widely circulated: "We belong to a race which has always in the past insisted on managing its own affairs in its own land. . . . The only point of view which we could take as Flemings and 'Flamingants' is that of Belgian national independence. On this point there is not the slightest divergence of views between Flemings and Walloons."

As only seven professors, among them two foreigners, consented to lecture, the authorities were compelled to recruit their staff among the few Belgians, Dutch and Germans who offered their services and, on October 21st 1916, Governor von Bissing came to Ghent to preside, with due solemnity, over the inauguration of the new institution. The effect of this ceremony was somewhat marred by an unfortunate coincidence: the Governor's cortège, driving to the University, met a convoy of Flemish deportees, surrounded with soldiers, on their way to the station. While the German Press recorded this triumph of Germanism over Latin rule and revived, on this occasion, the memory of the Battle of the Golden Spurs, won by the Flemish Communes against the King of France in the fourteenth century, the people of Ghent, who lived in the twentieth, drew their own conclusions.

Meanwhile, the attitude of the Flemish extremists who had dubbed themselves "activists" by contrast with the immense majority of Flemish "pacivists," was becoming more and more aggressive. Most of them did not wish Flanders to be annexed by Germany; on the contrary, they always insisted on autonomy. None of them enlisted in the German armies, as the Poles and the Czechs did in the Allied armies. But they fondly hoped that if the War ended by a German victory they would obtain satisfaction and form the new Government of a new country. Some of them even pursued annexationist dreams and spoke of re-uniting with the Mother-country the southern district of Flanders annexed by France in the seventeenth century.

Faced with the unanimous hostility of their compatriots, they knew that they were entirely dependent on German help and promises. They endeavoured, nevertheless, to give to the movement the appearance of reality.

On February 2nd 1917, a protected meeting took place in Ghent, during which a so-called Flemish National Congress elected a "Council of Flanders"—*Raad van Vlaanderen*—which was granted an audience by the German Chancellor in Brussels a month later. The latter declared that the Emperor wished to "give satisfaction to their just claims" and announced his intention to take measures which would ensure to the Flemish people "their free cultural and economic development," and introduce "a complete administrative separation." "The German Empire would, on the occasion of the peace negotiations, and also after the peace, do its utmost to secure and foster the free development of the Flemish race."

(7) King Albert and his Government were too well informed of the artificial character of the movement to be alarmed by these activities. They were the regrettable effect of a prolonged struggle and of the prestige obtained by German arms on a few timorous and disloyal men. It was evident that many activists were merely the dupes of their masters, and their close connection with the *Kommandantur* was the safest guarantee against their success. The measures announced by the Chancellor were of more serious import, not so much because they directly threatened the unity of the State, but because they might completely disorganize Belgian administration.

On March 21st 1917, a German decree divided Belgium into two administrative units. The deportations could still be disguised as War measures and the creation of the Flemish University as War propaganda, but administrative separation struck a blow at the very centre of Belgian life. It was not merely an interference in the internal organization of the nation, it was an attempt to break up this very

organization. "For the first time in history," writes Henri Pirenne, "the linguistic frontier became a political frontier. The narrow dogma which identifies nationality with language was imposed upon the people without any regard for their wishes or interests." The Flemish provinces, with part of Brabant including Brussels, became Flemish territory. The other provinces, with Namur as their centre, became Walloon territory; Government departments were divided accordingly.

Most Belgian Civil Servants refused to work under the new régime, and the resistance was prolonged in spite of a number of arrests and deportations. The position became so alarming that the Belgian Government sent secret instructions enjoining the *fonctionnaires* to remain at their posts. Many Germans realized the danger of chaos and the impossibility of replacing the recalcitrants on the spur of the moment. Governor von Bissing himself only reluctantly applied the measure imposed upon him by German Headquarters, and it is significant that neither the Ministry of Finance nor those of Justice and Railways were seriously affected.

A new decree made on August 9th, imposing the use of Flemish as official language in the new Flemish territory, including Brussels, further increased public indignation.

According to the census of 1911, out of the 736,480 inhabitants of the Capital, there were only 166,454 using Flemish alone and 203,988 using French alone, the remainder being bilingual. All the Burgomasters of Greater Brussels joined in a protest which they sent not only to the Governor but also to the representatives of neutral States in Brussels. "There were good reasons to believe," they declared, "that Germany nourished the hope of obtaining the sanction of international treaties for certain changes which she was introducing in the internal régime of Belgium." It would be a calamity for the country if the enemy, later on, invoked the *fait accompli* and interpreted the silence of the people as a tacit consent. They were,

therefore, in duty bound to resist to the utmost. "What wounds our population more than anything else," they added a few weeks later, "is to see a régime which affects their intimate feelings, their sacred rights and their liberties imposed upon them by a foreign Power without being consulted, or being able to express their own views."

In spite of the threats of the German authorities, who spoke of replacing Burgomasters and Aldermen by "dictators," fresh protests were made by the Communal Councils and conveyed to the Chancellor on November 8th. Owing, no doubt, to his intervention, the measure was never applied. The success of the resistance was due to the fact that it was not limited to Brussels, and extended to all classes of the population. Antwerp was as eloquent in her denunciation of the new measure as the Capital.

By venturing to alter the very foundations of the Belgian State, the Germans made the same mistake which had been made by Spain in the sixteenth century, by Austria in the eighteenth, and by King William of Holland before 1830, and they reaped the same consequences.<sup>1</sup>

(8) The analogy with the past history of the Belgian provinces was made still more evident by the conflict which arose during the last months of the occupation between the foreign authorities and the judicial power.

The Governor had been faced with an industrial strike and an administrative strike; his support of the activist movement was to bring about a judicial strike. The refusal of the magistrates to exercise their authority had been used repeatedly in Belgium whenever the people considered that their privileges had been violated by their feudal lords and, later, by their foreign governors. It had been in all times the last rampart of liberty.

On December 22nd 1917, the Council of Flanders, after adopting a resolution in favour of Flemish autonomy, dissolved itself and decided that new "elections" should take

<sup>1</sup> Pirenne, *op. cit.*

place. Meetings were organized in several towns under the protection of the German police, in order to obtain a semblance of approval to the separatist measures initiated by the German authorities. The manœuvre provoked such anger that, in Antwerp, the demonstrators were assailed by the crowd and obliged to fly for their lives. For a whole month the anti-activist agitation never abated. Again, the communal authorities led the way, and appeals were made to the neutral Ministers in Brussels and to the Chancellor in Berlin. Cardinal Mercier denounced the activists as "a handful of traitors without mandates." A well-known Flaimingant leader, M. Louis Franck, was deported for signing, with 200 presidents of Flemish societies, a manifesto dissociating himself from the movement and exposing it. The Flemish deputies who had remained in the country, the University of Brussels, the Court of Appeal of Ghent, joined in the fray, and the town of Brussels was condemned to a fine of two million francs for "political demonstration," because, in a solemn sitting, its council had received delegations of the principal societies of the Capital, who had come to register their protests. Finally, on February 7th, the Brussels Court of Appeal instructed the Attorney-General to prosecute the leading activists for "attempts against the security of the State."

This measure was in full accordance with the law of the country, hitherto recognized by the German authorities, but the latter could not allow their own confederates to suffer imprisonment for a crime which they had provoked. The arrested activists were promptly released and the President of the Court, with three of his colleagues, deported to Germany.

The pretence of legality, which the Governors had been at great pains to maintain, collapsed irremediably in this conflict. All the courts of the country, including the High Court, or *Cour de Cassation*, refused to sit, and the barristers joined hands with the magistrates. From Havre came a message congratulating the Brussels Court of Appeal for

"applying the laws against the bad citizens who, in connivance with the enemy, had pursued the criminal design of dismembering the country." The Governor was reduced to substituting improvised German Courts for the regular tribunals and organizing in Brussels a supreme court, or *Kaiserliches Obergericht*.

Thus all the attempts made by the occupying Power to use Belgian industries, Belgian labour, and Belgian institutions for its own purpose had lamentably failed. There are few examples in history in which invaders obtained so small a benefit from the conquest of a wealthy and over-populated country, and in which they were opposed so consistently by all classes, all parties and all professions. The conflict was leading, and would no doubt have led, in a few months, to a state of disruption. Liberation came just in time to prevent this danger. From this point of view, the successful military operations of 1918 may be considered as providential as the stubborn retreat of 1914, which allowed King Albert's army to co-operate to the end with the Allied forces.

#### (D) *Diplomacy*

(1) The violation of Belgian neutrality had raised several important problems. Had Germany's action altered the international status of the country? Was Belgium henceforth to be considered as an ordinary belligerent, and entitled to conclude treaties of alliance in the same way as the other nations who entered the War?

The King's view, shared by Baron Beyens, who came to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after M. Davignon's death, was that permanent neutrality, established by the treaties of 1839, was not abolished by the aggression to which the country had been subjected. She was still a neutral, lawfully defending her independence and entitled to the privileges conferred upon neutral States by article 10 of the fifth Hague Convention. The defensive operations of the

Belgian Army could not, according to international law, be considered as hostile acts. Belgium occupied a privileged position and could claim special reparations for the damage inflicted upon her. Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg had publicly recognized this right, in August 1914, and the King and his advisers decided not to alter the diplomatic status of the country before the conclusion of peace.

When, therefore, the representatives of Great Britain, France and Russia signed the Pact of London, on September 5th 1914, and undertook not to engage in separate negotiations with the enemy, Belgium abstained from taking action. Throughout the War, King Albert carefully avoided binding his country by any engagement which would have placed her on the same footing as the other belligerents. He also refrained from discussing War aims or from exacting from the Allies any promise, at a time when Belgian prestige stood at its highest, and when the spontaneous declarations of British and French Statesmen might easily have been converted into formal conventions. While Italy and, later on, Rumania made their own conditions before entering the struggle, he remained a passive witness of these treaties and refused to take advantage of favourable circumstances to reap the benefit of his action.

This policy was subject to some criticism. It was urged that, owing to the German aggression, the status of neutrality no longer existed, and that Belgium should at once take steps to secure not only material reparations, but also territorial advantages. While imposing upon her the 1839 treaties, the Powers had left the mouth of the Scheldt under Dutch sovereignty and deprived the country of two of her provinces. Their action had considerably weakened her most exposed frontier and prevented the sending of reinforcements to Antwerp in October 1914. Such disabilities must be removed, and now was the time to obtain their removal.

However plausible some of these arguments might have appeared, the King never departed from the strictly legal

attitude which he had adopted since his Accession. He was a neutral fulfilling his obligations by defending his neutrality, and asked no reward for doing what he considered his "duty." If he had joined the Allies, their War aims might have involved him in offensive operations which he was not prepared to undertake. He had given conclusive proofs of his loyalty to the faithful guarantors of Belgian neutrality, and he was determined to pursue the fight until the liberation and independence of the country was finally secured, but he did not think himself entitled to assume further obligations and to sacrifice his men for any other purpose.

The guaranteeing Powers duly appreciated the special circumstances in which Belgium was placed. On February 14th 1916, the British, French and Russian Ministers at Sainte Adresse (Havre) called upon Baron Beyens and read to him the following document:

*Your Excellency, the Allied Powers, signatories of the treaties guaranteeing the independence and neutrality of Belgium, have decided to renew to-day by a Solemn Act the engagements which they have taken towards your country, heroically faithful to her international obligations.*

*Therefore, we, Ministers of France, Great Britain and Russia, duly authorized by our Governments, have the honour to make the following declaration:—The Allied and Guaranteeing Powers declare that, when the time comes, the Belgian Government will be invited to participate in the peace negotiations, and that they will not end hostilities until Belgium is re-established in her political and economic independence and largely indemnified for the damage she has suffered. They will help Belgium in order to secure her commercial and financial restoration.*

This document, known as the "Declaration of Sainte Adresse," merely confirmed the speeches made by British and French statesmen in London and Paris. But the

solemn circumstances in which it was made gave fresh assurances of the Allies' solidarity, and removed all doubt which might have been caused by the fact that Belgium had not signed the Pact of London.

After expressing to the three Ministers the deep gratitude of his Government, Baron Beyens added: "Your words will awake an echo in the hearts of all Belgians, whether fighting at the front, suffering under enemy occupation, or awaiting in exile the hour of deliverance. . . . The fresh assurance which you have just given me will strengthen their unshakable conviction that Belgium will be raised from her ruins and restored to her complete political and economic independence. I am sure that I am their faithful interpreter when I tell you that you may have full confidence in us, as we have full confidence in our faithful guarantors, since we are all resolved to fight with them until the triumph of Right, for the defence of which we sacrificed ourselves without hesitation after the violation of our beloved country."

This answer, while preserving the special position occupied by Belgium, made perfectly clear her intention of pursuing the struggle to a finish without concluding a separate peace with the Central Powers.

During the following years, the Allies respected King Albert's desire to maintain his special rights. One or two incidents show, however, that if the Sovereign had been less insistent, Belgium might easily have been driven into the situation of an ordinary belligerent. After President Wilson's Note on "war aims," in December 1916, the Belgians were pressed to join in the allied answer. The Government was inclined to give way, but the King opposed this suggestion to the end. M. Berthelot, M. Briand's *Chef de Cabinet*, went all the way to La Panne to try and persuade him, but did not succeed in overcoming his resistance. Belgium sent a separate answer to Washington.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden: *Albert Ier*, p. 167.

(2) The "Declaration of Sainte Adresse" was not only justified by the peculiar circumstances in which Belgium was placed, but also by the position which she occupied in the moral conflict raised by the War.

Foreseeing the opposition which the violation of Belgian neutrality would cause abroad, and particularly in Great Britain, the German Chancellor had decided to make a clean breast of it in his speech of August the 4th. With Herr von Jagow, he agreed that the attitude of Belgium had always been correct, that the violation of Belgian territory was a breach of international law, and that the country was entitled to special reparations. Their only argument, at first, was that of military necessity.

As, however, protests from all sides grew louder and louder, German propagandists sought every pretext to justify their country's action. They contended that the treaties of 1839 had been abrogated by the treaties concluded in 1870.<sup>1</sup> They argued that the increase of her population and the acquisition of a vast colony had given Belgium such resources that she was no longer entitled to the protection given by her neutral status. With some inconsistency, they added that, since she was unable to defend herself through the weakness of her army, she could not enjoy a privilege which she could not uphold by force. Forgetting that the forts of the Meuse had been built following Bismarck's urgent demands, they accused Belgium of having broken her neutrality by erecting these defences against Germany.<sup>2</sup>

The climax of the campaign was reached after the "discovery" in the files of the Belgian General Staff, in Brussels, of "secret documents" relating to the famous military conversations of 1906, between Lieut.-General Ducarne and Colonel Barnardiston, the British Military Attaché.<sup>3</sup> On October 14th 1914, the walls of Brussels were placarded with large posters in which the conversations

<sup>1</sup> See p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Waxweiler: *La Belgique neutre et loyale*, p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 135.

were denounced as an “indisputable proof” of the perfidy of the Belgian Government, which had deliberately infringed the treaties eight years before. The posters were soon torn down by the indignant population, but a yellow pamphlet, entitled “Belgian Neutrality,” was given a wide publicity in Germany and translated into several languages. It reproduced Lieut.-General Ducarne’s report in a slightly altered form. The all-important proviso, that “the entry of the British into Belgium would only take place after the violation of the country’s neutrality by Germany,” was relegated to a footnote and completely ignored in the author’s one-sided commentaries. Under this new form, the “conversations” became one of the favourite themes of German propaganda until the end of hostilities.

As a matter of fact, the German authorities were aware that they had taken place.<sup>1</sup> If they did not protest at the time, it was because they were satisfied that these consultations could lead to no binding convention. Otherwise neither the Chancellor nor Herr von Jagow would have failed to use this argument, at the outbreak of hostilities, instead of publicly recognizing the perfect rectitude of Belgian policy.<sup>2</sup>

In an interview published by the *New York World* on March 22nd 1915, the King pointedly declared that such was his desire to avoid anything which might be interpreted as a breach of neutrality that he took steps to keep the German Military Attaché informed of the conversations. “When the Germans examined our archives,” he added, “they knew exactly what they would find there, and the surprise and indignation which they pretend to show at present are assumed.”<sup>3</sup>

If the direction of propaganda had remained in the hands of the civil authorities, it is doubtful, in the light of later declarations, whether the Germans would have used

<sup>1</sup> General Ducarne had repeatedly alluded to them in the Press in 1906 and 1912. Wullus-Rudiger: *La Belgique et l’Equilibre Européen*, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> De Ridder in *La Belgique et la Guerre*, vol. IV, pp. 173–174.

<sup>3</sup> *Revue Belge des Livres, etc.* . . . January–March 1935.

such a feeble argument which was bound to recoil against them. They would certainly have hesitated before denouncing to the world the interviews which took place, in 1912, between General Jungbluth and Colonel Bridges, since the account of these interviews, and the British and French documents pertaining to them, show plainly that King Albert and his Government never departed from a strictly impartial attitude before the violation of Belgian neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

Germany's military leaders preferred to ignore historical evidence. They were convinced that they could neutralize the disastrous effects of their treatment of Belgium by turning the tables against their victims, accusing them of the very abuses which they had themselves committed. It was Belgium, not Germany, who had broken the treaties, and it was the Belgian people who, by their excesses and cruelties, had compelled the German command to make reprisals at Louvain, Dinant, Andenne and other places. The Kaiser himself adopted this dangerous policy in his well-known telegram to President Wilson: "The Belgian Government has publicly encouraged the Belgian population to take part in the war, and has for a long time prepared this participation. The cruelties committed in this guerilla warfare, even by women and priests, against soldiers, doctors and ambulance men, have been such that my generals have finally been obliged to use the most rigorous means to punish the culprits and to spread terror among a blood-thirsty people, in order to prevent the perpetration of further murders and horrors."

A number of lawyers and publicists were for a long time engaged in the publication of German White books, in order to justify their Emperor's statement.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 135-6 and 139-140. It is gratifying to notice that a number of German writers, notably Dr. H. Roscmberg, have recently recognized the futility of these accusations.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning these German accusations, see the Papal Nuncio's report of December 6th 1914, published in *Revue Catholique des Idées et des Faits*, Janv. 8th 1921.

(3) As he wished to remain in independent Belgium and personally to superintend the direction of military operations, King Albert left a good deal of initiative to his ministers at Havre, and contented himself with endorsing or amending their most important decisions. He took, nevertheless, a particular interest in the conduct of Foreign Affairs, which he considered as intimately connected with the country's defence.

Although he did not believe that Germany could be induced to conclude a just peace until she had experienced severe military reverses, he followed every move on the diplomatic chess-board, in the hope that some opportunity might arise of shortening the duration of the War and relieving his people from the ordeal of enemy occupation. The ruthless measures taken by the Germans in Belgium increased his desire for an early conclusion of the struggle. On the other hand, he was firmly decided to maintain the attitude he had taken in 1914, and he realized that the Belgians would refuse to accept any settlement which did not restore the *status quo*. In this matter, as in all others, he considered their interests, not his own. "I have no right," he declared to a foreign statesman, "to expose my people to cruel reprisals even to defend my Crown."<sup>1</sup>

Belgium could not and would not have considered any proposals which did not prove acceptable to the guaranteeing powers who had responded to her appeal, or taken any step which might weaken their position; otherwise her hands remained free. The question, however, never arose. Although some Austrian and German statesmen urged, during the last months of the War, the full restoration of Belgian independence, the General Staff never relinquished their claim to military and economic hegemony.

In October 1916, Count Burian, the Austrian Minister, foreseeing the danger of a prolonged struggle, suggested to Berlin that the time had come to initiate negotiations. His project included, besides territorial advantages for Austria,

<sup>1</sup> Dunnot-Wilden, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

the annexation by Germany of the Belgian Congo, and the restoration of Belgium as a sovereign State, "safeguarding Germany's legitimate interests." While refusing to formulate any concrete proposal, the Kaiser seized this opportunity of initiating a peace offensive. He sent to the neutral Governments, in the beginning of December, a Note in which he protested that Germany and her Allies had only entered the War in order to defend their existence, and that he was personally anxious to stop further bloodshed. If the Entente Powers refused these overtures, "Germany and her Allies, who had proved invincible on the battlefield, would decline all responsibility for the consequences."

King Albert knew, through recent official declarations, that Germany was determined not to restore Belgium. The Chancellor having been bitterly reproached for his frank speech of August 4th 1914, had on several occasions insisted in the Reichstag on the necessity of exacting military and economic guarantees inconsistent with Belgian independence. Both Mr. Lloyd George and M. Briand could only consider with the deepest distrust proposals which evidently aimed at shifting the burden of responsibility from the Central Powers to the Allies. Speaking in the House of Commons on December 19th, the British Premier made great play of the German assertion of legitimate defence. He showed the Central Powers trembling under the threat of the formidable Belgian Army and intimidated into burning Belgian cities and massacring thousands of civilians. He alluded to the deportations of Belgian workmen which were taking place at the time, and asked whether such excesses could be committed by a country respectful of international law.

To their answer to the United States, on December 30th, the Allies added a paragraph referring more particularly to the situation of Belgium, which was evidently inspired by the Belgian Government.<sup>1</sup> After recalling the violation

<sup>1</sup> On this occasion, it was considered that Belgium should join in the Allies' answer, since the discussion had been originated by Germany.

of Belgian neutrality, acknowledged by the German Chancellor in the Reichstag on August 4th, the document defined Belgian war aims:

*Before the War Belgium only wished to entertain good relations with all her neighbours. Her King and Government pursue only one aim: the re-establishment of peace and law. But they will only accept a peace which will ensure their country's legitimate reparations, and guarantees and securities for the future.*

The Allies' answer, while refuting the German arguments, did not definitely close the door against further negotiations, but the Kaiser did not even put forward concrete proposals. The real object of his peace offensive had been to strengthen the resolution of his Allies and of his people. Believing that this purpose had been achieved, he issued a proclamation to his armies, stating that the enemy had refused his proposals and would bear, therefore, the full responsibility of pursuing the War. In a Note sent to the United States, Spain and Switzerland, he declared that Belgium had violated the "spirit of the treaties" by her submission to England in pre-War years (an allusion to the Ducarne-Barnardiston conversations) and had, besides, on two occasions (on August 3rd and 9th 1914) at the beginning of hostilities, rejected his friendly proposals which safeguarded her future independence.

(4) While keeping his watch on the Yser, King Albert saw the "case of Belgium" assuming an ever greater importance in the spiritual conflict between his friends and his enemies. During the last days of Antwerp, he entertained some fear that the enthusiasm stirred by his attitude would be shortlived. Speaking to the socialist leader, M. Destrée, he expressed his concern for the fate of Belgian writers and artists dispersed abroad, and his wish that they should remind the world, from time to time, of the sacrifices made by their compatriots for the maintenance of justice. He

was far too much absorbed in military affairs to devote much attention to War propaganda. He did not consider that such a good cause needed eloquent champions. The only measure taken by his Government was to provide the Belgian legations in certain Capitals with the most important news received at Havre, so that the allied and neutral Press might be kept informed of the efforts made by the army at the front, and of the situation in the occupied country.

The fact that Belgium loomed largely in the news many months after the 1914 campaign was entirely due to the ruthless measures taken by the German civil and military Governors of the country. The reaction provoked by these measures contributed to the moral isolation of Germany which turned against her even those who, by reason of birth or education, had formerly entertained towards her the warmest feelings. If the Kaiser and his advisers had allowed time to do its work, the effect produced by the violation of Belgian neutrality and the excesses of the soldiery might have gradually been effaced by topical events. But they kept the wound open by launching against Belgium unfounded counter-accusations, and by applying to their victim a régime which would have stirred protests, even if it had been used against the most treacherous aggressor.

This is particularly true of American public opinion in 1916-17. The real meaning of Germany's action in August 1914 could only be appreciated, on the other side of the Atlantic, by a minority. The majority of Americans were friendly towards the Allies, but a large number remained sympathetic to Germany, even after Louvain. President Wilson, although informed by Mr. Walter Page of the true character of the German invasion of Belgium, observed at first the strictest neutrality. The Belgian delegation which King Albert sent to Washington in 1914 received practically no encouragement. In his Note protesting against the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the President

maintained the same detachment, even alluding to the "humane attitude" hitherto adopted by the German Imperial Government.

His first energetic intervention, in favour of Belgium, was caused by the deportations of 1916. This measure was strongly denounced by the American Press as a new violation of international law and a return to the barbarous methods of slavery. The *New York Tribune* accused Germany of sending pacifists to the trenches, "since it has become (for them) the only means of obtaining peace." The attempt made by Governor von Bissing to quench the fire, in an interview given to the *New York Times*, only added fuel to it. Indeed, it was difficult for the American reader to believe that these mass levies were "a blessing to the land" and to the workers, who left the country "happy to be able once again to put into use their productive energy." On the other hand, the White House was informed by its Ambassador in Berlin that some Belgian deportees, who had succeeded in communicating with him, were compelled to work in munition factories.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Belgian Government's request for intervention, President Wilson sent to Berlin a formal protest, couched in friendly terms, but pointing out that the deportations were contrary to international usages and jeopardized the work of relief undertaken in occupied Belgium by American citizens. These discussions coincided with the President's intervention, urged by the German Government, in favour of peace negotiations, and the Kaiser finally decided to put a stop to a practice which antagonized American opinion and drew upon him besides outspoken protests from the Vatican, Holland and Spain.<sup>2</sup>

(5) The main purpose of the President's Note, issued on December 21st 1916, was to obtain from the belligerents a clear statement of their intentions. He did not wish to depart from his neutral attitude, and was convinced that a

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Gerard: *My Four Years in Germany*.

<sup>2</sup> Eizberger's *Memoirs*.

stable peace could not be concluded in the interest of one party against the other. In his message to the Senate of January 23rd 1917, he foreshadowed his conception of a league of friendly nations in which the United States might co-operate.

This time, the Belgian Government was not content to add a paragraph to the Allies' reply, but sent a separate Note to Washington which accurately expressed King Albert's attitude.<sup>1</sup> The President had suggested that, since both sides professed to pursue similar aims, some measure of agreement ought not to be impossible. The note pointed out that the War aims of Belgium could not be compared with those of Germany, since she never entertained any territorial ambitions and remained consistently faithful to her undertakings:

*If there is a country which has the right to say that she took up arms to defend her existence, it is surely Belgium. She had either to fight or to be dishonoured. Belgium passionately wishes that the constant sufferings of her people should come to an end, but she cannot accept a peace which does not restore her complete political and economic independence, secure the integrity of her territory and of her African colony, and indemnify her completely, while giving her sure guarantees for the future.*

The King took this opportunity of expressing again his gratitude to the United States for the generous help given in the work of relief, and expressed the wish that they should use their powerful influence to re-establish the Belgian nation in its rightful position.

By the end of January 1917, the President was able to compare this Note with the Kaiser's evasive answer to the American proposal. It was merely an offer of settling the differences between belligerents at a conference held in a neutral country, and was accompanied by a secret document

<sup>1</sup> See p. 267.

outlining the conditions which Germany would have accepted in case the Allies had favoured her peace overtures of December 12th. These included, among other claims, economic and territorial guarantees in Belgium with the annexation of Liège.

The final break between the United States and Germany was only to occur two months later, after the Kaiser, giving way to the pressure of his naval and military advisers, had intensified his submarine policy. But the origin of the change of attitude of an important section of the people, and perhaps of the President himself, must be sought in the impression produced by the mass deportation of Belgian workers. Its effect on American "pacifists" may be compared to that of the violation of Belgian neutrality on a number of British subjects who were at first opposed to any participation in the War. Events developed with irresistible force. The initial injustice which had appeared such a trifling matter to the advocates of the doctrine "necessity knows no law," gradually assumed formidable proportions, and the Kaiser's refusal to admit his wrong, or even to attenuate the hardships inflicted upon an innocent people, was slowly but surely dragging him to ruin.<sup>1</sup>

(6) It was about the same time that King Albert was informed of the desire entertained by the young Emperor of Austria, who had succeeded Francis Joseph, to bring about a peace settlement.

Karl von Hapsburg's brothers-in-law, Prince Sixte and Xavier de Bourbon-Parme, had first wished to join the French forces. Being unable to do so, owing to the French law excluding from the army the members of their House, they had asked the King of the Belgians to accept their services and had been given commissions in his artillery. In February 1917, Prince Sixte received a letter from the Emperor outlining certain peace proposals, and asked leave

<sup>1</sup> For the message sent by King Albert to President Wilson, after America's entry into the War, see Appendix III.

to go to France and Switzerland in order to pursue these negotiations.

Belgium had severely suffered from the underhand policy of the Austrian Government, which had not recalled its representatives from Brussels before August 28th 1914, while allowing Austrian guns to be used against Namur a few days before. Count Berchtold had endeavoured to justify this action by the expulsion of Austrian subjects from Antwerp and, later, by the alleged pre-War connivance of British and Belgian military authorities. This, however, was no reason why King Albert should hamper the initiative of the young Emperor who had no responsibility in the matter and who evidently wished to extricate the dual monarchy from the critical position in which it had been placed. The King did not entertain against Austria the strong prejudice prevailing in certain French and British quarters. He realized that a strong Austria or Austrian Confederation might become again in the future a safeguard against German imperialism, while a weak Austria would sooner or later be drawn into the German orbit. Although keenly interested in the new overtures, he did not wish to assume the initiative, and advised his young cousin to approach the Allied Governments before proceeding further in the matter.<sup>1</sup>

After consulting several French statesmen, Prince Sixte sent to Vienna the draft of a convention to which he thought the Allies, more particularly France and Russia, would agree. This included, among other clauses, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France and the full restoration of Belgium to her political and economic independence. In spite of the unsatisfactory answer given by Count Czernin, the French Ministers decided to pursue the correspondence. On March 23rd, the Prince and his brother went to Vienna and brought back a letter which seemed to afford a suitable basis for further discussion. The Emperor would not enter into a separate arrangement before attempting to

<sup>1</sup> Poincaré: *Au Service de la France*, 1917.

persuade the Kaiser, but agreed, on principle, on the questions of Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium (including reparations), and also undertook to restore the kingdom of Serbia. This letter was communicated to Mr. Lloyd George, at Folkestone, by M. Ribot, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and it was agreed that the two statesmen would confer later with Baron Sonnino at St. Jean de Maurienne.

Meanwhile, the Austrian Emperor had met the Kaiser at Homberg and, in order to obtain his approval, offered to cede to Germany Austrian Poland and Galicia in compensation for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine; but his attempt failed, owing to the opposition of von Hindenburg, whose hope in a final victory had been rekindled by the news which reached him from Russia. On May 9th 1917, Karl von Hapsburg, who now considered himself free to treat separately, in view of the uncompromising German attitude, wrote again to Prince Sixte, enclosing a Note to M. Poincaré in which he showed himself willing to abandon part of the Tyrol to Italy. His efforts came to nought owing mainly to the opposition of Baron Sonnino, without whom neither Mr. Lloyd George nor M. Ribot wished to pursue negotiations.<sup>1</sup> Their failure seems all the more to be regretted as Austria's lead would, no doubt, have been followed by Bulgaria and Turkey, bringing about an earlier conclusion of the War.

This affair had an unfortunate conclusion in April 1918, when Count Czernin, protesting his loyalty to Germany, revealed in a public speech that France had made secret proposals to Austria "which had been rejected owing to the French claim on Alsace-Lorraine." M. Clémenceau retorted that the Emperor had personally recognized, in a letter, that this claim was legitimate. Upon the Austrian Minister's denial "the Tiger" did not hesitate to publish the compromising document. Karl von Hapsburg was compelled to go to Spa, on May 12th, to apologize for his conduct and

<sup>1</sup> D. Lloyd George: *War Memoirs*, vol. IV.

Sixte de Bourbon: *L'Office de Part Séparée de l'Autriche*.

to sign a promise that he would henceforth never enter into separate negotiations with the Allies.

(7) Throughout the four years of War and the hopes and disappointments which succeeded each other until the final offensive, Belgium never altered her attitude with regard to War aims. The King felt as secure in the position he had taken up in the diplomatic field as in the defensive works he had gradually built up on the Yser. He was not an ordinary belligerent; he was merely repulsing an aggression made upon him in violation of solemn treaties. He pursued no annexationist policy, and his only demand was the re-establishment of the *status quo*, with compensation for damages and guarantees against the repetition of the ordeal inflicted upon his country. He had a further opportunity of stating his views on the occasion of the overtures made by the Pope, in 1917, to bring about a peace settlement.

It will be remembered that, at the outbreak of hostilities, the Vatican, owing mainly to Austrian influences, was anything but favourable to the Allies. The change of attitude which occurred a few months later was due no doubt to more accurate information. Nor must King Albert's influence be overlooked. On two occasions, in August and September 1914, through personal letters and diplomatic channels, he intervened to contradict false rumours which had spread in Rome regarding Belgian affairs. On January 15th he sent a telegram to the Pope, praising the attitude taken by Cardinal Mercier. A few days later, in full Consistory, the Holy Father condemned in general terms any breach of international law; he took steps to inform the King that this condemnation concerned particularly the violation of Belgian territory.

Although Benedict XV remained neutral, his relations with the French and British Governments improved from that time. Impressed by the peace resolution adopted by the Reichstag on July 19th, he sent a confidential letter to

the belligerents, suggesting the evacuation of France and Belgium, the return to Germany of her colonies, and the substitution in the future of arbitration for armaments. The success of this move depended mainly on Germany's attitude with regard to Belgium. The Pope was informed by the British Minister at the Vatican that England and France would only be disposed to enter the conversations when Germany had declared her intentions on this point.

As early as December 24th, King Albert sent a personal letter to the Holy Father in which he expressed the "keen and sympathetic interest" with which he had read his message; he associated himself with his wishes for a "just and durable peace" which would put an end to the sufferings of mankind, "and particularly of the Belgian people, so sorely tried."<sup>1</sup> He enclosed a Note of the Belgian Government in which his War aims were once more clearly defined: integrity of Belgian and colonial territory, political, economic and military independence without condition or restriction; reparations for the losses incurred, and guarantees against the renewal of the aggression of 1914.

The Vatican had apparently been misinformed with regard to the state of mind of the German War Lords. Although a number of deputies realized that the struggle could not be prolonged, the Kaiser's mind was more than ever haunted by imperial dreams. Peace with France would only mean the formation of a grand alliance against Great Britain and the preparation for the "Second Punic War."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of Austrian requests, no definite answer was given to the Pope's inquiry with regard to Belgium. As Chancellor Michaelis later declared before the German Commission of Inquiry, the Government wished to keep this trump card in their hands. He therefore sent a non-committal answer to Cardinal Gasparri on September 19th. The latter, who had on several occasions urged the necessity of obtaining precise information concerning Belgium, de-

<sup>1</sup> *Revue belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre*, January-March 1935, p. 405.

<sup>2</sup> Erzberger's *Memoirs*.

layed the publication of this answer in order to give the German Government a further opportunity of stating their position, but he only received, through the Papal Nuncio in Munich, a confidential document stating that "the situation was not sufficiently clear" to allow the German Government to "inform the Vatican of their desiderata concerning Belgium." The Reichstag Commission was not even informed of this communication.<sup>1</sup>

(8) It appears evident to-day that, although they had almost given up hope of a victorious peace, the Kaiser and his military advisers never renounced their intention of gaining "military and economic guarantees in Belgium." At a Crown Council held on September 11th 1917, at the Castle of Belle Vue, the Kaiser claimed Zeebrugge and a stretch of territory linking this submarine base to Germany. He later gave up this idea and agreed with Hindenburg and Ludendorff that it might be better to bring Belgium into an economic union with Germany and settle the question of Liège. The latter involved, according to a letter of Ludendorff to Dr. Michaelis, the annexation of the fortress. For Germany's military leaders, peace meant evidently only a truce giving them time to prepare for the "second punic war," and they would, on no account, consent to sacrifice the position of Liège, which was intended to help them as much in the future as it had hampered their action in the past.

At this same Crown Council of September 11th, von Kuhlmann, who had become Minister of Foreign Affairs, was empowered to initiate secret negotiations with the Allies. He hoped to divide them by approaching them separately, and thought that, once reassured with regard to the evacuation of the Belgian coast, Great Britain would exert pressure on France to persuade her to relinquish her claim on Alsace-Lorraine.

In accordance with this policy, von Kuhlmann put out various feelers. One of his most active agents was Baron

<sup>1</sup> See also D. Lloyd George: *War Memoirs*.

von der Lancken, Director of political affairs in the civil administration of Belgium. As early as June 1917, the latter endeavoured to get into touch with M. Briand through the medium of a Belgian industrialist well known to M. de Broqueville, M. Evence Coppée. Consulted by M. Briand, the Belgian Minister, though distrusting these overtures, considered that they ought not to be entirely disregarded. This was also the opinion of M. Ribot, then at the Quai d'Orsay. The various articles to be discussed between M. Briand and the German envoy dealt with the restoration of Belgium to the *status quo*, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, the evacuation of occupied territories, reparations, and the restitution of German colonies.<sup>1</sup> After further consultations, it was agreed that the Allied Governments should be informed of these plans, which, however, never materialized.

When he visited the French front, in September 1917, King Albert told M. Poincaré that his minister had on several occasions mentioned these conversations to him. He did not believe it possible that, "under present circumstances, Germany would be disposed to make acceptable proposals"; he had no "detailed information." According to M. Klobukowski, the Sovereign had declared during a ministerial council at La Panne: "We are surrounded with intrigues. The only thing left to Belgium is her honesty, let us keep it intact." It appears quite clear, in the light of present-day information, that during this "troubled year" he wished to avoid any secret parleys which, whatever their motive, might give the impression that the union between the Allies and Belgium was in the slightest degree weakened by the strain of War or the ordeal of German occupation.

The King must have been more directly interested in a vain attempt made by Count Törring, a Bavarian noble and a brother-in-law of Queen Elisabeth, to initiate conversations between Germany and Belgium through the agency of M. Peltzer, Belgian Minister at Berne, in the

<sup>1</sup> Chatelle: *L'Effort Belge pendant la Guerre*.

spring of 1918. The German Chancellor, Count von Hertling, was, at the time, in favour of the restoration of Belgian independence, but the military leaders who were preparing their great offensive were still opposed to it. At a second interview, which took place on June 30th, the Belgian Minister insisted that his Government could only express an opinion if satisfactory declarations were made in responsible quarters. The Chancellor's speech on July 11th put an end to these overtures, since he once more upheld the idea that Belgium must be held "as a pawn" against the restitution of the German colonies. M. Peltzer was instructed to inform his correspondent that this claim was opposed to Belgian policy and that, so long as it was maintained, all further consultations were useless.

Count Törring, undaunted, pursued his efforts on the German side and obtained from Admiral von Hintze, who had succeeded von Kuhlmann, a declaration that Germany was prepared to restore the *status quo* in Belgium with complete political and economic independence. This statement which reached the Belgian Minister at Berne on August 26th, contained some reservations, such as the maintenance of pre-War commercial treaties, which proved unacceptable. Without even waiting for the Belgian answer, Admiral von Hintze beat a hasty retreat and completely disavowed Count Törring's action and the conditions formulated in his letter.

(9) There is no doubt that these last fluctuations of the German civil authorities were due to the opposition of Hindenburg and Ludendorff who, by that time, controlled the Kaiser's decisions. In spite of the critical situation, the attitude of Germany's military leaders towards Belgium had not altered since the discussions of 1917.

At a council held on July 2nd and 3rd, they insisted that, come what may, Belgium should not be abandoned to "Anglo-French hegemony," and that the country should be divided into two States, Flemish and Walloon. A month

later, on August 13th, similar opinions were propounded at a conference held at Spa, although Ludendorff by that time entertained grave doubts concerning the final issue of the struggle. When, on August 15th, Admiral von Hintze assured President Wilson that Germany was ready to re-establish the *status quo* in Belgium, he was severely blamed for doing so. Ten days later he drafted a new declaration containing a proviso concerning "Belgo-German negotiations on certain particular points," but could not obtain the consent of Ludendorff who insisted that special mention should be made of the Flemish question. On the eve of the Armistice, at a time when the Empire's military machine was crumbling to pieces, and when revolution was ripe in the great industrial centres, the generals were still clinging to the forlorn hope of controlling the destinies of Belgium, and unwilling to agree to the first and essential condition of the most moderate peace settlement. As in pre-War days they had taken the equally heavy responsibility of planning the violation of Belgian territory, so they now assumed the heavier responsibility of hampering the efforts of the German civil authorities and of well-intentioned neutrals towards a moderate compromise. Belgium was a stumbling-block to these last negotiations as it had been a fatal obstacle to the realization of the Schlieffen Plan.

King Albert must have witnessed with some amazement the unexpected consequences of his action. On the eve of the Allied offensive which liberated his country, he explained to a compatriot why he confidently hoped that it would be successful. Alluding to the collapse of Bulgaria, he mentioned that his uncle Ferdinand had called him a fool because he refused to allow the Germans to pass through Belgium: "To-day," he added, "he must have altered his opinion; he must understand that it is always in a man's best interests to remain honest."<sup>1</sup>

The King was too intelligent to render the whole

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden : *Albert I, Roi des Belges*.

German people responsible for the action of their leaders, and too noble to nurse even towards the latter any mean desire of revenge, but he was at the same time determined to obtain full justice for his country, and would never have exerted his influence in favour of any settlement which would not have restored the *status quo* with adequate compensations. Since the German Government was never prepared to accept this demand, he could only remain a passive witness of the various attempts made by friends and foes to come to terms. Belgium was, for the Allies, the acid test of German sincerity. The King was bound to them by the same loyalty which had determined his decision to defend Belgian neutrality; he repeatedly declared that he could not undertake any action without the full agreement of the Guaranteeing Powers who had answered his appeal in August 1914, and refused to enter into separate conversations with Germany.<sup>1</sup> On more than one occasion he disagreed with the attitude taken by Allied Statesmen, but, not being called upon to express an opinion, he preferred to remain silent and to concentrate his energy on the military preparations which had become for him the only means of hastening the liberation of his people: "*Il n'y a qu'à continuer la guerre.*" There was no other alternative.<sup>2</sup>

#### (E) Visits and Visitors

(1) One of the most striking features of King Albert's career was that, while doing consciously what he considered his duty, he so often followed unconsciously the wisest and most profitable course. He was fond of saying that honesty is the best policy, and in his case at least, events seemed to confirm his words. It was for the sake of honesty that he did not hesitate to reject the ultimatum of August 2nd and the peace offer of August 9th. It was for the same

<sup>1</sup> He did not even consent to receive the Spanish Minister in Brussels, who wished to bring him a message from the German Chancellor in December 1916 (*Le Flambeau*, November 1928).

<sup>2</sup> Poincaré : *Au Service de la France*, 1917.

reason that, on August 18th, he decided to retire on Antwerp and to pursue the fight in the rear of the German advance. And it was again in the same spirit that he undertook to defend the Yser and to remain on Belgian soil with his troops until the complete liberation of his country.

The latter decision did not pass unchallenged in some Belgian quarters. While regretting that their Sovereign should expose himself at the front, some remarked that if he had paid frequent visits to Allied capitals and used his personal prestige to enlist American sympathies, he would have furthered the interests of his country more efficiently than by wasting precious months in a deserted corner of West Flanders. Had he even consented to direct the activity of his Government from Havre and kept in close communication with Allied Statesmen, far more useful results might have been achieved. It was even hinted that, had Leopold II found himself in a similar position, he would have adopted more practical and efficient methods of defending his country. Time could only show that, by following his personal inclination and doing simply what he thought best, King Albert was forestalling instinctively the calculations of sound diplomacy. He enjoyed an enormous credit, but human nature being what it is, his credit would soon have been exhausted had he travelled from one Capital to the other, and lost contact with Belgium and her army. He had a very clear notion of his position and of the small importance of Belgian affairs among the enormous interests at stake. To choose La Panne as his residence was certainly inconvenient and entailed some delays in carrying on public affairs. But, at the time, the Yser was far more important than Havre, and the army had to be given precedence over the Government.

By adopting this attitude, King Albert maintained intact the prestige he had won by his resistance to German aggression and by his skilful conduct of military operations. The whole world felt his debtor, because he behaved as if no debt were due to him. On a few critical occasions he

used his personal influence in trying to save the life of some patriots threatened by German Courts; in obtaining from the British Government that the work of relief should be allowed to proceed through the blockade; in endeavouring to put a stop to the deportations of 1916; but he was chary of making frequent requests to neutral and Allied governments, in spite of the respect and sympathy they showed him.

(2) He paid one short visit to England when, with Queen Elisabeth, in 1918, he attended the Silver Wedding of King George. The Belgian Sovereigns flew to London, on July 7th, and departed for La Panne four days later. Both Kings and Queens attended, on this occasion, a Symphony Concert given at the Albert Hall by the Military Symphonic Orchestra organized by the Queen of the Belgians. While the whole audience rose to greet them, King George turned towards his guest as if to give him the full benefit of this enthusiastic demonstration. The King of the Belgians stood a long time, evidently embarrassed by the prolonged cheers, his face tanned by exposure, crowned with a shock of fair hair, a martial figure almost incongruous among the flowery decorations of the Royal Box.

The few journeys to the British, French and Italian fronts were connected with the conduct of military operations. The King was eager to apply on the Yser the latest methods of warfare and the latest improvements in equipment which were in practice in the Allied armies. While wandering among foreign troops, he succeeded sometimes in retaining his incognito as he had so frequently done among his own men. It is reported that, while visiting the 29th Division in September 1916, he came across a party of British Tommies playing at crown and anchor. Noticing their alarm, he shook his head reassuringly and one of the men exclaimed: "We get some brass hats here, you can't always tell who they are. Now, if you only had a few

medals and some gold braid on, you might be the King of the Belgians."

(3) The result of King Albert's voluntary isolation was very different from what his critics had expected. If he only occasionally went abroad, he was very much sought after at home, and received the visits, not only of King George, accompanied by the Prince of Wales, of the King of Italy, and of the President of the French Republic, but of a number of distinguished generals, statesmen, writers and publicists. A visit to La Panne became a privilege all the more valued because it was seldom granted, and the event was carefully recorded by the guests.

M. Poincaré has left a detailed recollection of his first journey to Flanders in November 1914, immediately after the Battle of the Yser. He tells how the King came to meet him at the village of Adinkerque and took him in his car to his villa.

"I enter a bright drawing-room very simply furnished. The Queen, dressed all in white, receives me most graciously. Delicate and frail, it seems as if she should have been broken by the storm; but she has an indomitable soul; she has given herself wholly to her husband, her children and Belgium. She only lives for her family and for her adopted country. . . . She talks to me of the War with unflinching resolution. The young Princes and the little Princess are in England. She telegraphs to them every day, using a cable jealously guarded by our French soldiers, and she mentions this with gratitude. This royal misfortune so valiantly borne, in the bright surroundings of this seaside resort, seems at the same time imposing and pathetic."

Later, M. Poincaré and the King reviewed the troops on the Market Place of Furnes: "I feel deeply stirred by the sight of these troops displaying so much calm and dignity after being engaged in such heavy fighting. Later we enter the Hôtel de Ville and, by an old winding staircase,

reach the Council Room. The King points out to me a few flowers which he tells me were ordered from the only nursery gardener who remains in the district. A large fire burns on the broad hearth. We talk together for a few moments, the King, Millerand, Joffre and myself. We talk of the past, of the present and of the future. Is not Furnes now the temporary capital of Belgium, where national traditions are preserved?"

In April 1915, M. Poincaré again visited the King and spent some time at Houthem, where the Commander-in-Chief had been obliged to transfer his headquarters after the bombardment of Furnes: "It is there, in a poor village parsonage, that the valiant Sovereign, with his officers, prepares the operations of his army and the liberation of his country. Always reserved and somewhat grave, smiling through his melancholy, bearing with heroic strength the indefinite prolongation of the tragic ordeal which he has voluntarily undergone through his patriotism and loyalty, the King leads me to his humble abode."

Like all who had an opportunity of visiting Houthem, the French President was impressed by its quiet atmosphere, the low whitewashed cottages grouped around the clock tower, one of the very few left standing in West Flanders; the ancient parsonage surmounted by its turret and surrounded with trees; the quiet garden in which the curé paced up and down reading his prayers; the cool passage leading to the parlour with its large desk, now littered with maps, and its mantelpiece with artificial flowers under glass globes, on both sides of the clock, ticking away the hours, the weeks and the months of that long waiting.

These pictures may be contrasted with the description given by the Belgian writer, Louis Dumont-Wilden, who called at La Panne in 1918, on the eve of the great offensive: "I was introduced into a large drawing-room, sparsely furnished with cane arm-chairs against the wall. . . . In the middle of the room, a small table, covered with an old cretonne table-cloth. A large bay window in front of me,

opened on a grey sea-scape veiled with thick mist; the sky seemed melting into water. The rain, which had lasted already for several days, was still falling. . . . It was impossible to imagine a sadder scene of exile. Suddenly the door opened and the King appeared, very tall in his service dress, his face ruddy, tanned by the sea wind. The atmosphere changed, he brought with him the certitude of victory. His blue eyes were radiant."

He wished to speak to his author-compatriot of the forthcoming offensive. After explaining to him "with that calm common sense which was the hall-mark of his mind," the reasons which allowed him at last to be confident, he spoke "of the country which he was going to see again, and of those unfortunate people who, for four years, had been subjected to the harshest foreign occupation, without ever losing hope. At that moment his voice sunk, heavy with a feeling so deep that it seemed almost ashamed to show itself, and I realized how completely he had identified himself with his people and embodied their best qualities: their unconquerable confidence in life, their tranquil courage, their common sense which, in adversity, rose to the level of the finest reason."

(4) With that scrupulous respect for the Constitution which never left him, even when he was compelled by circumstances to assume exceptional powers, King Albert wished the leaders of the Opposition to join the exiled Government. As early as August 4th, both M. Hymans, representing the Liberals, and M. Vandervelde, representing the Socialists, had become Ministers of State. After the Battle of the Yser the latter was invited to visit the Belgian front and to address the soldiers. "Our men have fought magnificently for a noble cause," King Albert said to him, "I should like them to be told. Will you go and speak to them in my name?" The Socialist Minister, who had so often proclaimed his republican principles, readily accepted, and a series of meetings were improvised at the rear, while

quiet talks to small groups of men took place even in the front trenches.

One of these meetings was peculiarly impressive. It was held in a wrecked church about a mile from the Yser; the nave had been entirely destroyed, but the choir was still standing. The men in their ragged uniforms, supplemented by odd pieces of civilian clothing, pressed eagerly around the Labour leader, who spoke to them of the effect produced abroad by their heroic resistance, and of the inexhaustible reserves of the Allies who were now fighting, at last, at their side. He compared their country to that very church in which they were now standing; the greater part of it had been conquered, but the sanctuary was still preserved and, as long as it stood inviolate, as long as a corner of national territory remained independent, ultimate victory was not only possible, but inevitable. "The time would come when they would leave their muddy trenches along the Yser and push before them the army of the invader who, no longer able to overwhelm them with heavier guns and larger battalions, would be compelled to retire. They would return to their towns and villages and be reunited to their families. . . ." The majority grouped around the orator nodded approvingly, and a shout of enthusiasm closed the peroration, but there were, on the fringe of the audience, a few men who, unable to entertain such bright hopes, smiled bitterly and shrugged their shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

The same evening the inhabitants of La Panne witnessed a strange sight: the King, in his military coat, and M. Vandervelde, in his slouch hat and wide ulster, walking side by side on the sea front, engaged in an animated and friendly conversation.

(5) Before his Accession to the throne, King Albert had already discarded any prejudice, even against those who opposed the monarchy. His predecessors, faithful to the

<sup>1</sup> Witnessed by the A.



- 9 King Albert and the landscape painter Emile Claus.  
(La Panne, 1916 )
- Above, King Albert and the poet Emile Verhaeren  
(La Panne, 1915 )

spirit of the Constitution, had always refused to take sides in political and religious conflicts and placed themselves above creeds and parties. He went a step further. He considered himself as the trustee of the whole nation and endeavoured to get into touch with all the distinguished men of his country, whether statesmen, scientists, artists or writers.

In his youth, the poet Emile Verhaeren, carried away by his humanitarian enthusiasm, had favoured extreme revolutionary doctrines, and was looked upon almost as an anarchist. Some of his verses caused no small scandal among the bourgeoisie, but he was the greatest Belgian poet alive, and this was sufficient reason for the King and Queen to wish to know him. He accepted a decoration, another cause for scandal, this time on the revolutionary side. He had been often received as a friend at Laeken, and, after the military situation had steadied in West Flanders, was asked to spend a few days at La Panne.

He has left a poem, one of the last which he wrote before his fatal accident in the railway station at Rouen, entitled *Un Lambeau de Patrie*—literally, a shred of country. It describes that narrow strip of land swept by the North wind, with its wild sand dunes, alight with patriotic loyalty:

*Ce n'est qu'un bout de sol étroit,  
Mais qui renferme encore et sa Reine et son Roi  
Et l'amour condensé d'un peuple qui les aime.*

The poet takes us along the front trenches, among the marshes of the Yser and, after describing the ruined towns and villages, reminds us of the happy days when birds nested among the blossoming apple trees, and when the clouds appeared so bright in the blue Flemish sky that they looked like “angels crossing the air.” He leans over the graves of those who, without shroud or coffin, rest in the country’s arms. Then he turns to the Queen wandering and praying among these poor crosses, like a “discreet

shadow"; to the King who, returning from the dark mud of the battlefield, comes to meet her and returns with her towards their simple house which opens on the sea:

*Et leurs pas réunis montent par la campagne  
Vers leur simple maison qui s'ouvre sur la mer.<sup>1</sup>*

The picture of King Albert may be visualized in the happy, homely days of peace when his country's prosperity seemed to promise a long life among bright surroundings and unchallenged popularity. It may be shown against the clamorous background of his frantic people greeting their liberator, riding at the head of his troops through his reconquered towns, or in the calm atmosphere of his study, where he worked long and patiently to heal the wounds of the invasion and repair the material and moral damage it had wrought. Again, the last tragedy may be evoked, the slow procession bearing his body on a gun-carriage during the darkest night of Belgian history. But those who saw La Panne during the years of waiting will never forget the tall and austere figure standing on that last strip of Belgian shore confronted with stormy clouds and foaming sea, watching with calm courage during that long vigil, with all the regal splendour stripped from his Court, and almost all his land torn from his friendly grasp, alone against the blind elements and the blinder injustice of man, with no comfort but his Queen, brought as low as any Sovereign could be brought by the forces of destiny and as high as any man can be raised by the conviction of his right and the faith in his cause. In this picture, his features can scarcely be distinguished; it is merely a dark outline against the lowering sky, but it enshrines some of the finest virtues which have ever graced a human being, and in itself should be enough, in spite of the lapse of time and the ever distant vision of history, to save a whole nation from despair and reconcile it to its fate.

<sup>1</sup> *Les Ailes Rouges de la Guerre*, 1916.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Return

#### (A) *The Offensive in Flanders*

(1) THE spring of 1918 was perhaps the most critical period of the War since the Marne and the First Battle of Ypres, with its tragic prelude on the Yser. The collapse of Russia, during the previous winter, had released a large number of German divisions which were now massed against the Western Front, and American reinforcements could not yet restore the balance. Realizing the urgency of obtaining a rapid decision, Hindenburg and Ludendorff planned a series of powerful attacks which, by disorganizing the Allies' defence, should at last open the way to the Straits. The first blow fell on March 21st, on the Arras front, when the British lines were pushed back to within sight of Amiens. The second was struck, on April 9th, between Armentières and Ypres, the Allies losing the ground so dearly won during the 1917 offensive. Here again, in spite of initial success, no definite result was obtained and, on April 30th, Ludendorff was obliged to countermand an order to advance against the Anglo-Belgian front towards the coast.

A diversion had to be made in the hope of withdrawing from Flanders the powerful Allied forces which had been rushed north and, on May 27th, the Crown Prince launched his offensive in Champagne. The French removed some of their units from the north, but the deficiency was partly made up by British troops, and the American divisions began to take a share in the operations. These were already 275,000 strong, and new powerful contingents arrived every month.

The Germans attacked again in Champagne, on July  
29<sup>th</sup>

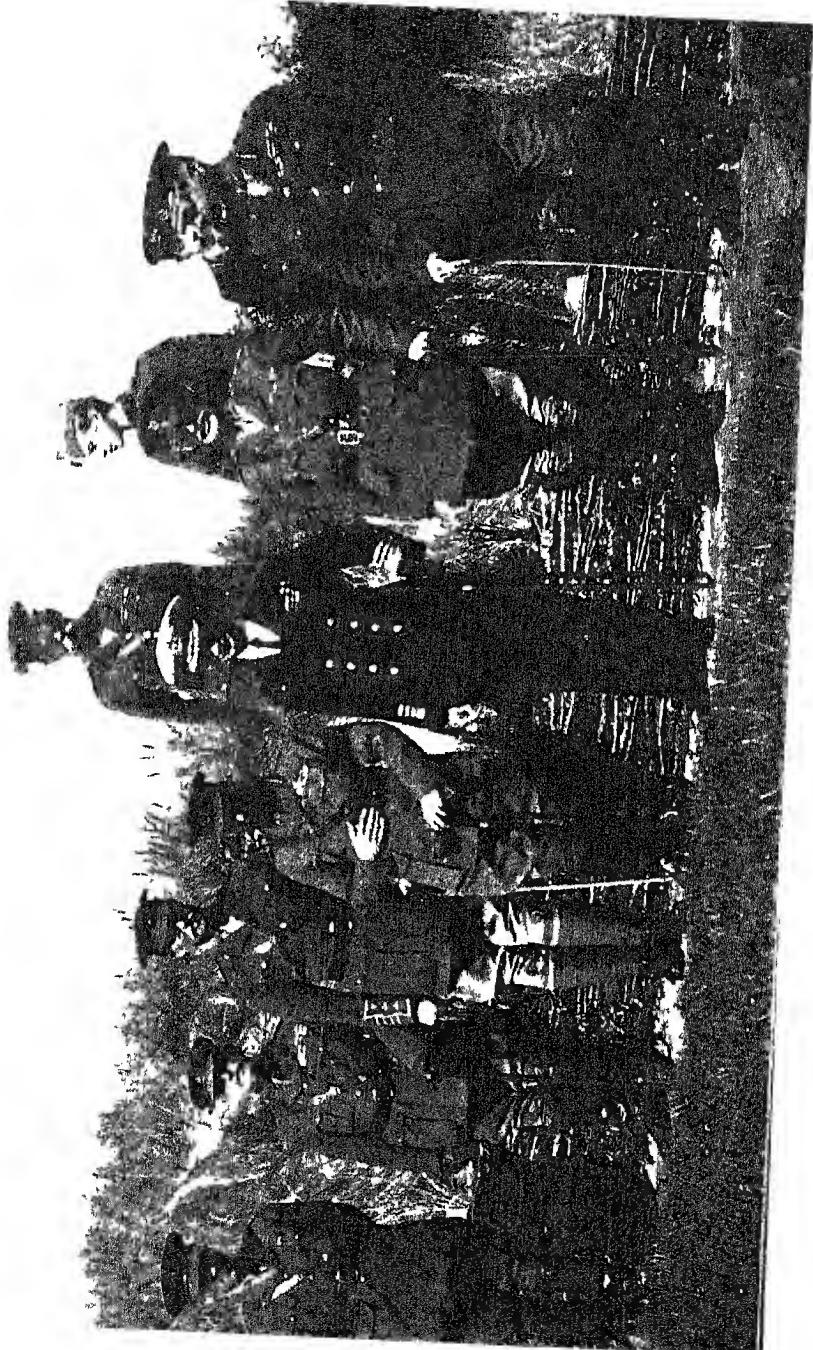
15th. As Ludeendorff was beginning to reinforce his armies in Flanders, the initiative passed into Allied hands. The French counter-attacked at Château Thierry, the British at Albert, and most of the lost ground was reconquered. The supreme effort of the German armies in the North never materialized.

Instead of strengthening their lines in Flanders, the War Lords were obliged to send all available troops to France, and it soon became apparent, from the evidence given by deserters and prisoners, that the morale of their men was seriously affected by the reverses which they had lately experienced.

On August 17th, King Albert warned Marshal Foch, who had by now been placed in supreme command of the Allies' armies, of the weakening of the enemy's resistance in West Flanders, and suggested that an attack by four Belgian divisions, starting from Dixmude, might yield appreciable results.

The Marshal was at the time preparing his gigantic offensive starting simultaneously in the Argonne, in the north of France and in Flanders. He paid a visit to the King and, with the agreement of Sir Douglas Haig, offered him the command of the *Groupe d'armées des Flandres* including, beside the Belgian divisions which were destined to play the most important part in the operations, the Second British Army, three French divisions and some cavalry and artillery reinforcements.

King Albert took two days to consider his reply. Although his relationship with French Headquarters had greatly improved since the tragic days of October 1914, when it was suggested that he should give up his leadership, some recent events had reminded him that this flattering offer was fraught with some danger. He had not even been warned, in the spring, of the decision taken by the Allies to entrust the supreme command to General Foch and had received no invitation to attend the Inter-Allyed Committee meeting at Versailles. On April 17th, he had been obliged



10. Group showing, from left to right, Lord Cromer, Lord Stamfordham, King Albert, King George, Sir Roger Keyes and, on the extreme right, the Earl of Athlone. Behind them, Sir Derek Keppel, Prince Leopold and Prince Charles.  
(La Pautie, August 1918.)

*(The I has unfortunately been unable to identify the other British officers.)*

once more to explain to M. Poincaré, who approached him on the subject, that he would be unable and unwilling to divide his army and to follow all instructions sent by Allied Headquarters. There had been throughout the War a tendency to place the Belgians in a subordinate position and to ask them to co-operate in movements concerning which they had not been consulted.<sup>1</sup>

The King realized that, in this joint offensive, his prestige depended largely on the success of his own troops. He had no doubt regarding their fighting qualities and their training—these had been severely tested at Merckem—but, owing to the difficult conditions of recruiting, he had no reserves available. A recent epidemic of dysentery and influenza had, besides, caused irreparable gaps in some of his units. An offensive on such a large scale, against well-prepared positions, meant necessarily severe losses. In case of reverse—or even prolonged check—the Belgians might be placed in a position of inferiority compared with the Allies. Under the circumstances, a decisive victory in the forthcoming offensive was almost as essential as successful resistance in the defensive had been in October 1914. But the Sovereign had at last arrived at the conclusion that the great struggle was coming to an end. News from Italy, from Salonika and from the Near East showed that Germany's Allies were reaching the end of their resources. America's new armies were pouring into France and there were some evident signs of deterioration among the German troops in Flanders.

On September 11th, the King drove to the Château de Bombon and formally accepted the Marshal's offer. Wishing to add the advice of a distinguished French officer to that of his own Staff, he requested that General de Goutte should be appointed his Major-General.

(2) The date fixed by Marshal Foch for the general offensive was September 27th. No time was to be lost, and King Albert devoted all his energy to completing his

<sup>1</sup> Poincaré, *op. cit.*, vol. X, *passim*. See pp. 238, 239.

preparations. Over two hundred batteries had to be moved forward with large stores of ammunition, and this work had to be carried out during the night to avoid detection. The German forces in Flanders had been reduced, but they were admirably equipped, every regiment possessing over one hundred machine-guns. Their artillery remained formidable, no less than seventy-two batteries having been located between Dixmude and Ypres, most of them in the famous Houthulst Wood, which had the reputation of being impregnable. It was considered, since the time of Marlborough, as being the "key of the Flemish plain."

During the four last years the Germans had been as thorough in their defensive preparations as the Belgians themselves. Their first line was lightly held, but included a series of strong advance-posts. Their second line, known as *Flandern II*, ran along the crest of Flanders from Houthulst to Glieluvelt, and was protected with barbed-wire entanglements and an uninterrupted series of concrete works. The third line, known as *Flandern I*, extended from the Yser floods, behind Dixmude, to Roulers and Menin.<sup>1</sup>

The King's plan, issued in a series of instructions a week before the action, was first of all directed against the strategical position of the crest of Flanders, including the series of low hills dominating the Ypres salient, along the German second position. While two Belgian divisions remained on the Yser, ready to pursue the enemy as soon as the Allied advance compelled him to retire, one French and nine Belgian divisions, debouching south of Dixmude, were to attack the crest of Flanders. The six British divisions would follow up the advance east of Ypres, and another Belgian division would surround Dixmude, which was too strongly fortified to be stormed without great losses.

During the final preparations the King was comforted by news which fully confirmed his opinion that Germany's Allies could no longer stand the strain. On September 14th, Karl von Hapsburg, discouraged by the disastrous reverses

<sup>1</sup> See chapter IV

of his armies in Italy, was claimouring for peace. On the 15th, it was announced that the successful offensive in Salonika had definitely routed the Bulgarian Army and, on the 19th, the British conquest of Palestine was finally assured.

It is difficult to gauge exactly the King's state of mind during these last days which he spent on the Yser. As a man of action, he must have been absorbed by his new responsibilities; at the same time he felt that his return to Belgium could not solve at once the urgent problems confronting him. He would find the country which he had left so happy and prosperous, full of the material and moral wreckage of war. He would be faced with grave economic and financial difficulties. The occupation had lasted too long not to undermine the loyalty of a small section of the population; there was already some talk of Flemish separatism. "Victory will wipe out all that," he declared cheerfully.<sup>1</sup> For months he had fought alone against tremendous odds, for years he had been waiting for this day. There was a clear light of confidence in his eyes. He was going to ride through these villages and towns which he had only been able hitherto to watch from the air. Some enthusiasts had criticized his prudence during the time of adversity. Now that the tide was turning he could at last shake off his burden and act and speak according to his heart.

There seems to have been only one moment, in August 1914, when he gave way to anger, as he realized the injustice of the treatment to which he was subjected. If ever joy swept over him and allowed him to forget the ceaseless worries of State affairs, it must have been on the eve of this last struggle which was going to decide his fate and that of his country. He was for once an optimist and shared the sense of relief of his faithful soldiers who, under cover of night, were leaving for good their quarters behind the Yser on their way to the front trenches.

<sup>1</sup> D'Inverno-Wilden: *A Royal Visit*.

His last proclamation, dated September 27th, rings like trumpet call:

*Soldiers, you are going to deliver a powerful assault on the enemy's positions. Beside your British and French comrades, you will repulse the invader who, for more than four years, has oppressed your brothers. The hour is decisive; everywhere the Germans are in retreat. Show yourselves worthy of the sacred cause of our independence, of our traditions and of our race. Be assured of victory. Forward for right, liberty and Belgium, glorious and immortal.*

(3) The next day before dawn the Belgian troops, concealed in the front-line trenches, witnessed the most formidable artillery preparations which they had ever seen. For three hours the horizon was alight with explosions, shells poured on all enemy batteries which had been located, on every stronghold and on all the main roads and junctions through which German reinforcements were rushed to the front. The feelings of infantrymen waiting for "zero hour" have often been described. Beside that almost unbearable tension, the Belgians experienced the yearning need to march forward, leave behind them the mud and tedious drudgery of the Yser, and join their families who had been waiting for them for so long. In the light of the bombardment and rockets, they saw only the lunar landscape of shell-pocked fields, but they knew that behind this deserted waste lay the familiar sights and faces which had almost been blurred by their tragic experiences.

When at last the barrage settled in front of them and the signal to advance was given, they walked slowly through the heavy mud and pelting rain—for the weather was against them—making straight for their objectives and leaving to their followers the task of reducing the enemy's outposts, wherever artillery preparations had not levelled them to the ground. The resistance was desperate in many

places and some batteries had to be stormed, their gunners firing to the last. It stiffened still more when the crest of Flanders was reached and there were some determined counter-attacks. The result of the first day was, nevertheless, beyond expectation. Towards the South the British had reached all their objectives and the Allies had advanced nearly five miles. In twenty-four hours they had won almost as much ground as during the arduous offensive of 1917.

On the 29th, the conquest of the Flanders crest was completed and the Houthulst Wood finally cleared. The Germans lost the bridge-head of Dixmude which for so long had been their firmest stronghold on the Yser. But when, on the next day, the Allies reached the third German position, *Flandern I*, their progress was brought to a standstill. They were no longer opposed only by a series of centres of resistance, but met with a continuous line of defences against which assaults unprepared by artillery were both costly and ineffectual. Besides, the men were exhausted by three days of continuous fighting and, for once, the Belgian Commissariat broke down, some units having to be revictualled by aeroplane. There were 10,000 wounded, half of the officers were on the casualty list, and it became evident that a halt would have to be called. The General commanding the French 7th Corps insisted on launching repeated attacks on the German position, but the King, by his instructions of October 2nd, pointed out that a general advance could not be proceeded with before the artillery had been brought up. The first phase of the offensive, generally known as the Battle of the Crest of Flanders, was brought to an end. The Allies had taken 6000 prisoners and 250 guns, progressing all along the line for about ten miles.

(4) The Germans used these few days' respite to strengthen their position. Their six Divisions, worn out by the attack, were replaced by fresh troops and reinforced. The order was still to resist to the end, but it was easy to

see from the prisoners' attitude that the morale of the army was severely shaken.

The King decided on a new plan of attack on *Flandern I*. The War was no longer being waged in a deserted country and he was particularly anxious to spare the civil population of the surrounding villages and towns. He knew that most of the inhabitants of this thickly populated district had refused to leave their homes and were awaiting deliverance hidden in their cellars. He ordered, therefore, that the bombardment should be limited to the defence works erected by the Germans and that street fighting should be avoided by pressing the attacks through the countryside. It was arranged that the British should push forward on the Lys, the Belgians north of Roulers and the French south of that town, while the Belgian divisions on the Yser would hold themselves ready to pursue the enemy along the coast.

The new general offensive launched on October 14th, in the early morning, was crowned with success. The Belgians and French surrounded Roulers; on the 16th, the Germans left Nieuport and the British entered Courtrai two days later. The Belgian infantry had reached Ostend when the cavalry entered Bruges, the enemy limiting resistance to a series of rear-guard actions.

The situation in which the German Army found itself at the time is explained in an order of the day issued by the Commander of the 4th Army Corps:

*When the enemy renewed his great offensive on October 14th, we were obliged to choose a new position on the Lys Canal. We shall make a strong stand here; the battle must go on until the enemy understands that he cannot annihilate us. You all know what it is to have war waged in one's own country. Help to preserve your own people from this calamity.*

Though severely shaken, the Germans were not yet broken, and the units defending the *Lys Stellung*, which had been hastily organized, were determined to oppose the

utmost resistance. Maréchal Foch, while preparing his offensive in Lorraine, decided to increase the pressure in Flanders. On October 15th, he added two French and two American divisions to the group of armies under King Albert's command, and placed General Boissoudy at the head of the French Army in Flanders, including the 7th, 13th and 34th Corps.

The King planned a general advance directed towards the East. The Second British Army which had crossed the Lys would now push towards the Scheldt, while the French would cross the Lys between Courtrai and Deynze, and the Belgians capture the *Lys Stellung*. The latter attack which started on October 31st, was stubbornly opposed by German marines, but operations developed according to plan and, on November 1st, the German retreat was general on the whole front. The next day an American division entered Oudenaarde.

The situation was so satisfactory that it was possible to withdraw the Second British Army, which was again placed under the direct command of Sir Douglas Haig. In a message to Belgian Headquarters, Maréchal Foch stated that the main purpose of the offensive undertaken by the King had been achieved: "The group of armies in Flanders have, by a series of successful operations, reached the Scheldt above Ghent."

North of that town the Belgians were faced with a new obstacle, the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal strongly held by the German rear-guard. Before proceeding further, a few days were required to allow the British to exert pressure towards the South. The King decided that the new attack should take place on November 11th. On the same day, at 11 a.m., the German plenipotentiaries signed the Armistice and the long struggle came to an end.

It is not sufficiently realized that, up to the last moment, the opposition which met the Allied advance in Flanders, in the autumn of 1918, was carried out by picked troops who, although inferior in numbers, fought with courage and

discipline. German Headquarters were careful not to send to the front any unit in which some symptom of disaffection had been noticed. There was no rout, the retreat was methodical, and the resistance of the enemy on successive positions, from *Flandern I* to the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal, was only overcome by the generalship of King Albert and by the devotion of the troops placed under his command. The casualty lists were heavy, especially during the first fortnight. The Belgians alone lost, in dead and wounded, 1000 officers and 29,000 men. The King had every reason to be proud of his army which had won the praise of French and British military leaders: "Officers, non-commissioned officers and men," as he wrote in an order of the day, dated November 18th, "have deserved well of the country."

*During over four years you have stubbornly defended, in the mud of the Yser, the last shred of our land. . . . I am proud of you. I asked a great deal from you; you gave me your support ungrudgingly. . . . You have won the nation's gratitude and admiration.*

(5) Through the offensive the King was, from time to time, kept informed of the negotiations pursued by Germany to obtain an armistice.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff who, in August, were still strongly opposed to concessions, especially concerning the restoration of Belgian independence, had become increasingly alarmed by the deterioration of their armies, following the succession of reverses which they had suffered. During the first days of October, they urgently pressed the civil authorities in Berlin to open negotiations, declaring that, at any moment, the discipline of certain units might collapse. The new Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, was not, however, anxious to assume the odium of a diplomatic defeat for which the military authorities were responsible. After some delay, he nevertheless informed President Wilson of his readiness to conclude an

armistice and to negotiate peace on the basis of the well-known "Fourteen Points." The President replied, on October 8th, that the full acceptance of his peace conditions must be secured before any armistice could be considered. At a Cabinet meeting held in Berlin, Ludendorff declared that the situation was extremely critical, but that certain conditions remained unacceptable. He "did not fear a catastrophe, but wished to save the army in order to preserve some means of pressure during the peace negotiations." From this apparently contradictory statement and from other German documents published in later years, it seems as if the War Lords had been fighting desperately for a truce which would have given them time to reorganize their army, subdue rebellion at home, and prolong resistance. Hence the demand formulated at the time by the German Government for a mixed commission which would have "discussed the evacuation of occupied territory," a proposal which was rejected by the President a few days later.

His refusal provoked a strong protest on the part of the War Lords. They considered the President's demands as "dishonourable" and declared that a fight to the end would be preferable to their acceptance. They were particularly opposed to the cession of Alsace-Lorraine, to the unconditional restoration of Belgian independence and to the suspension of submarine warfare. But the time was past when the Empire's policy was dictated by the Generals. Riots were breaking out in several German towns and the question of the Kaiser's abdication was already under discussion.

On the 21st, Prince Max von Baden accepted all the President's conditions and, two days later, the latter sent to the Entente Powers a Note asking whether they considered that the military situation allowed them to conclude an armistice on such a basis. A Council of the military chiefs, presided over by Marshal Foch, took place at Senlis on October 25th. Their report being favourable, the Allies'

representatives, assembled at Versailles, discussed the proposal and, on November 4th, drafted the text of the Armistice.

This included, among other clauses, the evacuation, within fifteen days, of Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and Alsace-Lorraine. All the inhabitants, imprisoned or detained in Germany, had to be sent home. All damages had to be repaired, and the sums abstracted from the Belgian National Bank restored. Belgium was also to receive a certain amount of rolling stock in compensation for that which had been removed during the War. Precautions were taken to ensure the military superiority of the Allies by the occupation of the left bank of the Rhine, pending the conclusion of the peace negotiations.

The news of this surrender was at first received in Brussels with a certain amount of scepticism. In spite of evident signs of deterioration, the Belgians could not believe that the Germans had been brought so low as to admit complete defeat. Even among the army in Flanders, a certain astonishment was felt at seeing the long struggle come to such an abrupt end. It seemed almost unbelievable that a people who had been hitherto so united and so perfectly organized, should give up the fight as soon as their frontiers were threatened.

It was suggested that the Germans, remembering the excesses they had committed in Belgium, and fearing reprisals, were determined to avoid at all costs the prosecution of the War in their own country.<sup>1</sup> Such apprehensions were quite unjustified as long as the command of the Belgian Army remained under King Albert's control. He was not the man to avenge the wrongs inflicted upon his country by the German military leaders on disarmed and powerless civilians, and he had too high an opinion of Belgian honour not to repress severely any individual breach of discipline which might have occurred.

<sup>1</sup> See order of the day, p. 302.

The last order of the day, which he signed on December 1st, has never been sufficiently appreciated:

*In 1914, the Belgian Army rose against the invader to defend the Nation's honour. For over four years we have fought loyally an adversary who, relying on his strength, has committed the worst abuses. Victory has rewarded our efforts. You are going to enter enemy territory, not in order to exact reprisals, but to ensure the execution of the clauses of the Armistice.*

*Soldiers of Honour, you will not tarnish your glory; you will, as formerly, fulfil your duty with firmness, but also with loyalty. By respecting the population and safeguarding property, you will confound your adversaries and raise yourself in the esteem of your Allies.*

*Officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers, I trust that you will remain worthy of Belgium.*

This document might be placed side by side with the Kaiser's telegram to President Wilson denouncing "Belgian atrocities," in order to show the moral gulf which separated the two monarchs. The contrast between the triumphal progress of the young King and the humiliating flight of his opponent is almost too obvious to be emphasized. Its moral lesson has become a favourite theme among those who delight in drawing edifying conclusions from the events of history. But the greatness of King Albert is quite independent of his ultimate victory. It lies more in the perfect dignity which he preserved through all the vicissitudes of fortune than in the success which crowned his efforts. It is in vain that we seek, among his utterances, for one remark directed against the man who had borne the greatest share of responsibility in the disaster which had fallen upon Belgium. It was not in the King's nature to scoff at a fallen enemy. Silence was his only revenge.

Belgians and French had often repeated the old saying: *Heure viendra qui tout paiera*, but according to their individual temperaments, had given the words different

meanings. The payment the King wished to receive was not the humiliation of his enemies but the happiness of his friends. He was not unduly elated by the success of his arms, and to a foreign general who congratulated him at the time, he replied with a sigh: "Yes, but what ruins! Europe will take ten, perhaps twenty years to recover."<sup>1</sup>

He thought mostly of Belgium, but even if his own country could be rapidly restored to her former prosperity, she could never be secure as long as the wounds of the great European Powers, including Germany, were not healed. He had foreseen, with the best generals, the long duration of the War; few statesmen estimated more accurately the difficulties and delays of the post-War period.

(6) During the first fortnight of the offensive, the King had not left La Panne and his General's Quarters at Houthem. He flew to and fro from the battlefield. His pilot tells us how, on one occasion, they saw the Queen standing on the shore; he made a point of alighting as close to her as possible. The King jumped hastily out of the cockpit and ran to meet her and give her the day's news.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as Sir Roger Keyes learned that the Germans had left Ostend, he immediately communicated with King Albert, and a surprise visit to the town was improvised. The Sovereigns, accompanied only by the King's *officier d'ordonnance*, Major Van Overstraeten, were picked up at La Panne by a British destroyer. The port of Ostend having been blocked by the enemy, it was found necessary to use, first a coastal motor boat, and later a small rowing-boat, to approach the jetty which was scaled by a narrow iron ladder. The small party of five, including the Sovereigns and Sir Roger Keyes, reached the old lighthouse in the darkness and attracted the notice of a group of fishermen who were greatly surprised by the appearance of these officers in khaki and British naval uniforms escorting a lady. The Germans had just left and no Allied

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Willy Coppens: *Pages de Gloire*.



11. King Albert and Sir Roger Keyes aboard a motor-boat on their way to Ostend, October 1918.

Above: the Return to Bruges: the Sovereign leaving the Hotel Provincial.  
(Photo—Musée de l'Home.)

soldier had yet set foot in the town. The noise of doors and windows being opened by the inhabitants was soon heard by the visitors, and when they reached the Grand' Place the curiosity of the people had become acute.

It was not before they were about to enter the Town Hall that the King and Queen were recognized, and that a jubilant crowd surrounded them. With some difficulty they made their way to the Council Room where the Burgomaster and his colleagues were eagerly discussing the situation over a jug of beer. It was certainly the least formal reception which the Sovereigns were ever given in a Belgian town, but the lack of preparations by no means damped the enthusiasm of the Ostendais. In the absence of any troops protecting the place against a return of the enemy, it was, of course, impossible to prolong the visit. The people were disappointed when they saw their Sovereigns make their way towards the port, in spite of their entreaties. They followed them eagerly to the jetty and were greatly surprised to see them disappear one after the other down the iron ladder.

While on its way to the destroyer, the small coastal motor boat experienced engine trouble, and it was only when, in response to a signal, another boat came to the rescue, that the journey could be proceeded with. The party reached La Panne at two o'clock in the morning. The King and Queen were both delighted at having been the first to set foot in Ostend and to come into contact with the population of the first Belgian town evacuated by the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

On October 25th King Albert entered Bruges, at the head of his troops, accompanied by the Queen, the Princes and Princess Marie-José. Behind them rode General Gillain, the Belgian Chief of Staff, the Earl of Athlone, Admirals Keyes and Ronarch and General Degoutte.

The old buildings had been preserved and their art treasures safely stored away, but the inhabitants, subjected for so long to the hardships of the "war zone" régime, had

<sup>1</sup> Account given to the A. by Colonel Van Overstraeten.

scarcely recovered from their surprise at their oppressor's hurried departure. There had been no time to prepare for the King's arrival, and it was not without difficulty that a few flags could be found to decorate the houses. The soldiers in their new khaki uniforms and steel helmets seemed almost like strangers to the people. It was only when the Royal Family appeared that all doubts were dispelled and the mad cheering began. This meeting of the Sovereigns with their people surging around them to kiss their hands and touch their clothes, as if to make sure that they were not dreaming, was particularly moving in its spontaneous exuberance. The King, who usually succeeded in hiding his feelings, was obviously touched when he shook hands with the aged Burgomaster, Comte Visart de Bocarmé, that perfect gentleman who had stopped a German officer's loud threats by saying: "You have the power, sir. You can imprison me, condemn me, rob me, shoot me, but I have the right to demand that you should do it politely."

The weather had cleared. The historical buildings of the Grand' Place formed an ideal setting. It was as if the old belfry, which for the last eight centuries had witnessed so many happy and tragic scenes, looked down upon the deliverer's return and listened to the people's cry of recognition. During the night the inhabitants were kept awake by the noise of horses' hooves and the rumble of guns and wagons on the cobble-stones. The moon shone on the ancient square and on the soldiers' steel helmets, so like the casques worn by the infantry in the Burgundian period. The spirit of the past brooded over the city and watched over the homecoming of the army.

(B) *Lophem*

(1) During the last days of the War, King Albert took up his residence in the small Château of Lophem, about a mile south of Bruges. It was there that he came into contact

with the first representatives of Belgian public opinion and that he determined the broad outlines of his policy.

One of the first difficulties in his way was to reconcile the views of his subjects who had left the country with the views of those who had remained at home. Some Belgians at Havre, Paris and London had had great dreams concerning their country's future. Impressed by the popularity enjoyed by Belgium during the first years of the War and by the eloquent promises of Allied statesmen, they had looked forward to the time when their country, "liberated from the shackles of neutrality," would exert some influence in the concert of Europe. The abrogation of neutrality implied for them the return of Luxemburg and Limburg lost in 1839, and even the annexation of Dutch Flanders, with Belgian sovereignty over the mouth of the Scheldt. They were bent on obtaining such safeguards as would for ever secure them against another German attack. Placed in a key position between the Western European Powers, Belgium might again, as she had done in the glorious Burgundian period, play an important part in the history of the world. Leopold II had given her a vast African Empire. Albert I, through his heroic action, would ensure her a dominant position among the small nations of Europe. Living as they did in France or England, the *émigrés* compared unfavourably the parochial life of pre-War Belgium with the free and open existence of the great nations which they had learned to admire. They repeated Leopold II's remark : "Small country, small people."

In Belgium also the enforced leisure created by the War had had its effect, but the people's minds were more concerned with internal than with external affairs. During the first years of the King's reign, the Flemish movement and the agitation for universal suffrage had made considerable progress. Patriotic resistance to the occupying power had brought together all men of goodwill without any distinction of class, creed or party. Many prejudices had been weakened and a closer union had favoured

democratic tendencies. The way in which all responsible Flemish leaders had opposed the separatist manœuvres of the German Government, had strengthened the belief that the linguistic problem could be solved without endangering the unity of the State. The Belgians shared the illusion, prevalent in all belligerent countries, that the War would be followed by a period of great prosperity. Their hardships having been particularly severe and undeserved, they fondly treasured the hope that they would be amply compensated for their losses.

King Albert had been kept informed of the wishes entertained by his people, both inside and outside Belgium. He considered that satisfaction must first be given to the vast majority who had waited patiently and loyally for the hour of liberation. His views were shared by M. Cooremans who, when assuming the Premiership, had expressed his desire to resign at the end of hostilities. It was known that a certain prejudice existed in Belgium against the "Government of Havre" and, generally speaking, towards all civilians who had left the country. This feeling, though somewhat exaggerated, was only human, and the King had decided to avoid friction by forming a new Government including men who had lived in close contact with the population inside Belgium during the last four years.

(2) On November 11th, the Sovereign received at Lopikem the visit of M. Saura, the Spanish Consul in Brussels, accompanied by the Liberal deputy, M. Paul Emile Janson and the Ghent Labour leader, M. Anseele. The circumstances which led to this visit are worth recording.

As soon as it was known that the Germans were asking for an armistice, the Bruxellois noticed a peculiar activity among German soldiers and officials. Numerous convoys were seen coming from the front and moving in the direction of Germany; heaps of papers and archives were being burnt in the Park. The return of several notables, liberated by Prince Max von Baden, among whom was

Burgomaster Max, was shortly expected. The people witnessed with amazement open acts of insubordination, which the officers, formerly so overbearing, did not dare to punish.

On the 10th a regular riot broke out, which is accurately described by M. Vierset, an official of the town: "A procession of several thousand soldiers, preceded by a lorry filled with rifles, started about 2 p.m. from the Gare du Nord, waving red flags and the French colours. The soldiers who were throwing to the crowd their tricolour cockades, made for the Palace of Justice. . . . When they reached the Place Poelaert, they held a meeting, five to six thousand strong, and acclaimed the Republic. . . . In Place Stéphanie the first conflict broke out between revolutionists and imperialists. The majority of the demonstrators followed the rue de la Régence. When they reached the Hôtel de France, they degraded some officers and trampled on the German flag. The red flag was hoisted on the *Palais de la Nation*, and a German Captain made a speech from the balcony. We heard that the downfall of the Government had been proclaimed and that General von Falkenhausen—the German Governor of Belgium—had been placed under arrest. The crowd began to sing, and some Belgians joined in a song hailing universal suffrage. Near the Stock Exchange, soldiers stopped some officers' motor-cars, disarmed the occupants and tore off their shoulder-straps. The same treatment was inflicted on officers at the house of Prince Ruprecht of Bavaria. At another meeting held in the Grand' Place, it was unhappily noticed that some Belgian demonstrators were waving flags. . . . A committee of German workmen and soldiers, having requested the Burgomaster to attend their meeting, he replied that his predecessor was required at the Town Hall, that the German Government no longer existed and that he was not obliged to recognize its successor.

"The news of this extraordinary demonstration spread rapidly through the town which was soon filled with a

jubilant crowd, singing and cheering the flags hoisted at every window. Some German soldiers were seen singing the *Brabangonne* and the *Marseillaise*. About 5.30 p.m. a party of German marines arrived in the Place de Brouckère in cars decorated with Belgian flags. One of them made a speech in French, praising King Albert and the Belgian people. At his request, the Belgian flag was hoisted on one of the cafés. . . . The joyful demonstrations of the crowd were soon marred by the excesses of some roughs who fraternized with the Germans. The bookstalls of the Place de la Monnaie were set on fire and the brigade had to protect the General Post Office from the flames."<sup>1</sup>

Reports of the riots were grossly exaggerated and the belief spread in certain quarters that the German revolutionaries might join forces with Belgian Communists and provoke a social upheaval. The German officials who had not yet been able to leave Brussels were in fear of their lives, and Baron von der Lancken called on the Spanish Ambassador, Marquis de Villalobar, begging him to ask M. Francqui to hasten the arrival of the King, so that public order might be restored. He offered the envoys all facilities to pass through the German lines. M. Francqui, who as President of the *Comité d'Alimentation* was at the time the only Belgian authority in the town besides the Burgomaster, refused to leave Brussels, but suggested that M. Janson, who happened to be present, should undertake the task. It was arranged that M. Saura should accompany him.

On their way to Bruges the travellers passed through Ghent, which had been evacuated by the Germans on the previous night. They called at the Town Hall and M. Anseele, the acting Burgomaster, volunteered to accompany them. All the motor-cars having been requisitioned, the emissaries were compelled to finish their journey in a cab. While lunching with the General commanding the Second Belgian Division, who had informed the King of their visit, they learned that the Armistice had been signed.

<sup>1</sup> *Mes Souvenirs sur l'Occupation Allemande*.

M. Janson's account of the delegate's reception by the King has been confirmed by those who witnessed the interview, and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. Those who, for political reasons or other motives, questioned the wisdom of the Sovereign's policy, suggested that he had been deceived by a sensational account of the Brussels riots and that, under the impression that the populace joined with the mutinous soldiers, he granted a number of reforms which he would never have conceded under normal circumstances. Such legends are without foundation.

M. Janson, in a few words, explained to the Sovereign the events of the previous day, his account being confirmed by M. Saura. The King, who was in no way impressed by the news, answered that the Armistice fixed the timetable of the German evacuation and of the advance of the Allied armies. He wished, of course, to enter Brussels as early as possible, but it was not within his power to alter these arrangements. The delegates then asked the King whether he would allow them to explain the political situation. M. Anseele, speaking for the Socialists, expressed their wish to obtain universal suffrage at the age of twenty-one. Addressing the Catholic Prime Minister, the Labour leader assured him that if this was not opposed, he could rely on the full support of the Socialists for the reconstruction of the country. M. Janson added that the vast majority of Liberals were now ready to support the extension of the franchise and that, while a certain section of the Catholic party still preferred the age limit of twenty-five, others were inclined to grant the proposed reform. He alluded to the problem of the University of Ghent on which opinion was divided in all parties.

"The King," wrote M. Janson, "was already aware of the state of public opinion in Belgium. He had besides, during the War, spoken in the trenches with Socialists and Christian Democrats; with their usual spontaneity, they had expressed to him their hopes and their expectations. It was therefore without any surprise that he

learned that universal suffrage seemed to all the best solution of the franchise problem."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the policy adopted at Lopliem was merely the result of the information which the Sovereign had gathered during the last months of the War. It may be added that, as early as December 1914, at La Panne, the King had given M. Vandervelde assurances that he would favour the adoption of the electoral reform urged by the Socialists. The argument which impressed him most was the injustice which would arise if young soldiers, who had done so much for the preservation of the country, should not be given the same right as older or richer civilians. He was no theorist in such matters, and did not believe blindly in the panacea of democratic institutions, but his dislike of anything savouring of unfairness was so strong that he was prepared to run some risks in order to remove any cause of grievance.

It was the same feeling that prompted him to give satisfaction to Flemish demands. The Walloon provinces having fallen first into the hands of the enemy, most of his recruits had been Flemings, and the latter outnumbered the Walloons in the army. Both sections of the population, soldiers and civilians, had resisted the common enemy with the same courage and loyalty, and it would have been unfair to penalize the Flemish population for the misdeeds of a few "activists."

For several months the King and his ministers had discussed linguistic reforms, specially with reference to the University of Ghent.<sup>2</sup> It seemed only right that loyalty should be rewarded and that those who had refused the offer of the Germans should never have occasion to regret their attitude after the liberation of the country.

King Albert did not, however, give an immediate answer to MM. Janson and Aussele. After introducing them to the Queen, he left the room and retired to his study. A few moments later the delegates were shown in and the

<sup>1</sup> Lecture given by M. Janson, quoted by Dumont-Wilden, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> See p. 375.

King told them that he wished, first of all, to consult a number of representatives of the three political parties, of which he drew up a list. M. Cooreman suggested that the names of some prominent Belgians who did not belong to Parliament, but who had played an important part during the occupation, should be included. Among these were MM. Jaspar and Delacroix, two well-known barristers. It was arranged that these gentlemen should be informed of the King's desire to confer with them, and that the next interview should take place at Lophem, three days later.

In adopting this course, the Sovereign merely conformed to constitutional practice. M. Cooreman had already intimated his intention of resigning, which he did the next day, and it is usual for the King, before choosing a new Prime Minister, to consult political leaders. The existing Government was the result of the patriotic co-operation of all parties, and it was obvious that, under the circumstances, the Coalition should be maintained. The only original feature in the proceedings was the inclusion of non-political individuals. But this was justified by the desire to bring into the new Government men whose influence had been particularly marked during the occupation.

(3) When the second meeting took place, on November 14th, all apprehensions with regard to the Brussels riots—if these ever existed—had been removed. The hostility felt against the Germans, at the time, was far too acute to allow the Belgians to fraternize with them, even if they chose to rebel against their military leaders. Rightly or wrongly, these advances and offers of friendship were interpreted as a desperate manœuvre of the enemy, made at the eleventh hour, in the hope of ruining the country's unity. The movement did not spread and, when M. Vandervelde reached the Capital, he found the Socialists as ready to welcome the King as the rest of the population.

The triumphal reception given to the Sovereigns in Ghent, on the previous day, had already shown that the

Belgian workmen were immune against Bolshevism. The last Germans had left the town some hours before, and the few "activists" who had not fled with them were in hiding. The welcome given to the troops and to the Commander-in-Chief in the proud city which had been subjected to ruthless military authorities, and humiliated by the creation of what was called the "German University," was even more boisterous than in Bruges. The people sang and danced all through the night and, in a few places, the wild Kermesse was lit up by the bonfires made of the furniture and papers thrown from the windows of the houses and cafés formerly occupied by the Germans or their activist friends.

Answering the warm congratulations of M. Anseelc, who received him at the Town Hall, the King expressed in moving terms his gratitude to the Gantois, but his vision of the urgent needs of his country remained unimpaired: "Let us work," he exclaimed, "for the reconstruction of our land, as we have struggled for four years, hand in hand, honestly, in a spirit of union and sacrifice, for the protection of our free institutions."

It was urgent to provide the country with a new Government at the earliest possible date. Within two days the new Cabinet was formed and its programme outlined. It included only three members of the previous Government, MM. Hymans, Renkin and de Broqueville. At the suggestion of his advisers, the King asked M. Delacroix to assume the heavy duties of the Premiership. One of the main reasons which determined this choice was that the new Premier, having had no connection with politics, was likely to be in a better position than any other leader to ensure the co-operation of all parties.

(4) The King's decision was unanimously approved at the time, not only by the politicians who had been called into consultation at Lophem, but by the whole Parliament, which endorsed unreservedly the declarations made by the Sovereign a few days later. But the problems confronting

the new Government were formidable. To the difficulties created in all belligerent countries by demobilization and economic and financial disturbances, were added the tremendous tasks of pursuing the work of relief, restoring wrecked industries, rebuilding railways, and housing the population of devastated areas. The return of the refugees, instead of relieving it, further aggravated the situation.

The exaggerated hopes entertained by the Belgians were bound to lead to some disappointment, and the conduct of affairs by M. Delacroix was severely criticized. It was further suggested, during the following years, that the concessions made to the Socialists and Flamingants had been premature. In Belgium, as in other countries, universal suffrage did not prove a cure for all evils, and those who had opposed it in previous days suggested that, if instead of weakening his authority by favouring democratic reforms, the King had strengthened it by exerting a sterner control on the conduct of affairs, the results might have been very different. Some Belgians, influenced by M. Maurras and the *Action Française*, wished to consolidate the power of the Executive, and regretted that King Albert did not choose this opportunity of altering or even of ignoring the Constitution. For four years he had wielded supreme power at the head of the Army, and his decrees had not been sanctioned by Parliament. Considering the immense prestige he enjoyed, would it not have been easy for him to keep the helm in his own hands and to suppress the political squabbles, unreasonable expenditure and costly delays which hampered the nation's recovery?

This suggestion did not even draw an answer from the Sovereign. It was a matter between him and his conscience. He had sworn to respect the Constitution and, even if he had believed in the virtues of modern dictatorship, he would have considered himself bound by his oath. But when it was repeatedly said that at Lophem he had been the "victim of a plot," and that his policy had been dictated by the fear of revolution; when M. Janson and his col-

leagues were accused of grossly exaggerating the reports of the riots in order to exact from him these very reforms which he had for so long deemed advisable—he chafed against such unfair and humiliating criticism.

Speaking to M. Vandervelde of a recent pamphlet on the subject, he said: “They seem to think that, in November 1918, I gave way to the fear of Bolshevism. You know that, for a long time, my mind had been made up concerning what had to be done on our return to the country.”

On February 10th 1930, twelve years after the event, he finally lost patience and wrote to his Prime Minister, M. Jaspar, the following letter:

MY DEAR PRIME MINISTER,

Following the publication of a recent book, people talk again of Lophem. I can no longer allow without energetic protest the spreading of legends resting on no foundation, which discredit our political régime, and make me appear to have played a ridiculous and pernicious part in a critical hour of our history. These legends describe me as having been the victim of a plot hatched by bad citizens who had led me to believe in the possible and even immediate peril of revolution, if exaggerated concessions were denied to democratic claims. Under this false impression, I am supposed to have compelled the Cooremann Cabinet to resign and to have submitted to the formation of a Ministry whose composition and programme, instead of answering the superior interests of the country's restoration, had merely satisfied the interests of a group of conspirators.

I am in duty bound to protect the honour of those who are accused of having prepared and carried out this intrigue, and I have the right to defend my dignity as a man and as head of the State.

I therefore declare:

1. That the lamented M. Cooremann, from the time of his accession to power, had told me of his irrevocable

intention of resigning as soon as the Government returned to Belgium. He fulfilled this intention spontaneously, at his own appointed time, without any intervention on my part;

2. That, even before the end of hostilities, the Queen and I had come into contact with the inhabitants of Ostend, Tournai, Bruges and many other liberated localities, where we had been able to appreciate the patriotic exaltation of the Belgians who had remained under German rule; and that, from information which had reached me from all sides, I knew that the same spirit prevailed in all parts of the kingdom;

3. That nobody ever spoke to me of any imminent or future social or political trouble. Nobody attempted to weigh on my decision by giving me a wrong or tendentious description of the state of public opinion;

4. That the Delacroix Cabinet was formed according to constitutional usages, after consultation with several leaders of all parties; and that all those whom I consulted, without any exception, agreed that it was essential that the new Government should be one of national union, as were the two preceding Cabinets. Besides, Parliament acting with full liberty soon afterwards gave its confidence to the new Government.

I solemnly affirm that any other version of the events is contrary to the truth.

I should be much obliged, my dear Prime Minister, if you would make public my present declaration.

Believe me ever your very affectionate,

ALBERT.

The vigorous language in which this letter is couched reminds us of the note prepared for French Headquarters during the Battle of the Yser, and shows that, in spite of his perfect self-command, the King's temper could be

stirred by injustice, especially when it involved either his soldiers or his councillors.<sup>1</sup>

The popular conception of a debonair Monarch whose kindness tolerated all offences, and whose smiling indulgence was inexhaustible, is entirely mistaken. The Sovereign was ready to forgive any fault which was not prompted by malice and to overlook any breach of etiquette which was only the result of ignorance. But those who lived with him knew that his displeasure was roused by anything which appeared underhand. One of his secretaries has written that "he possessed such personal prestige that all those who were admitted to work for him ended by idolizing him," and several of his collaborators were not trained courtiers. At the same time he wished his privacy to be respected, and resented both insincerity and indiscretion. The main feature of his character was perfect balance, and that balance was maintained between goodness and strength as it was between physical and intellectual energy, or active and contemplative life.

(5) The letter on the Lophem incident has a further interest. It was published the next day in every Belgian paper and was the means chosen by the King to appeal directly to public opinion in a controversy. Such a procedure would appear almost impossible in other constitutional kingdoms, more particularly in Great Britain.

The power of the Crown, so well defined by Bagehot, "to advise, to encourage and to warn," is used more freely in Belgium than in any other constitutional country. King Albert was merely following a tradition established by his predecessors, the first "public letter" of this kind having been written by Leopold I in 1857. In State affairs the Sovereign's initiative is strictly limited by ministerial responsibilities, but when it is merely the expression of a personal opinion, it is as free as that of any other statesman.

The distinction was clearly established in the Chamber

<sup>1</sup> See p. 212.

in the course of a debate on December 6th 1904: "It is going too far," declared the Minister of Justice on that occasion, "to say that the minister must assume responsibility for all the King's speeches and of all his letters. Such is not the constitutional doctrine. Article 64 of the Constitution reads: 'No statement by the King can carry any effect unless it is signed by a minister who, by that act alone, makes himself responsible.' You understand, Gentlemen, that the minister is only responsible for such statements or measures which may affect the course of public affairs, the rights of citizens or public interest; but, outside such statements, the King has the right to express opinions, sentiments or wishes without his ministers accepting responsibility for them. If it were not so, the King would be placed below the least of his citizens when, as a matter of fact, he occupies an eminent position in our political structure, and exerts a considerable though discreet influence on public affairs."

According to the articles of the Belgian Constitution, the King's power appears almost as restricted as that of the President of the French Republic; he nominates and revokes his ministers, dissolves and prorogues the Chambers, declares war; he makes treaties, civil and military appointments, and all decrees necessary for the administration of the law. In all these public functions the minister's signature is required, and the Constitution is particularly explicit regarding ministerial responsibility. Apart from the command of the Army, which he only assumes in exceptional circumstances, the Sovereign's initiative seems therefore reduced to the right of dissolution and to the choice of his minister during a crisis and, here again, he is bound by the respective situation of parties in Parliament. But this superficial conception of the King's power does not give any idea of the influence which he wields as "warner and adviser." Besides the written law, which he is bound to respect, there are unwritten usages and practices which give him a wide scope of action.

When the franchise was extended in 1893, some students of Belgian institutions were afraid of the effect which this reform might have on the monarchy. "Kingship," wrote Banning, "is a brilliant frame around an empty canvas. It renders the negative service of eliminating competition for the first rank. . . . What will this fiction become in the future, when confronted with the universal suffrage question? Will a decorative monarchy, without intrinsic force, resist the strength of the masses which ignore its value or only know it as a principle opposed to their rule?"<sup>1</sup>

What these thinkers did not foresee was that there was no fundamental antagonism between the development of democracy and that of the monarchy, the existence of the latter being in no way dependent on the preservation of political privileges. On the contrary, as King Albert seems to have foreseen in his Accession speech, the part played by the Sovereign as defender of purely national interests, and arbiter of political and social conflicts, was destined to grow with the extension of the suffrage. "The King has not conquered new power," remarks M. de Licheryelde, "but the influence of the Crown, far from diminishing, has steadily increased with the years; it has in no way been affected by the change from the *censitaire régime* to universal suffrage. It even looks as if the monarchy were stronger, since it no longer seems to rest on a limited section of the community, which agitators are always ready to denounce as being in opposition with the other."<sup>2</sup>

The King possessed, in no small degree, that historical sense which is by no means the exclusive privilege of historians, but which is so seldom found among politicians. He saw no reason why a constitutional monarch should not reconcile social as well as political or philosophical differences. He had no sympathy with the doctrine of class war, but he had a great deal of sympathy for the condition of the poor and was not more inclined to question the sincerity of the

<sup>1</sup> *Réflexions morales et politiques.*

<sup>2</sup> *La Monarchie en Belgique sous Léopold I et Léopold II.*

Labour leaders than that of the representatives of other parties. Their republicanism did not frighten him. Far from placing them outside the pale, he appealed to their patriotism and took them into his confidence. Almost unconsciously, he increased the prestige of the Crown by broadening the bases of political life, and by calling on all Belgian citizens indiscriminately to collaborate in the work of national reconstruction. Dictatorship and demagogic were both alien to him. He was fond of alluding to the Prussian Junkers' motto: "*Sei der König absolut, dass er unsfern Willen thut*"—let the King wield absolute power so that he acts according to our will—and knew that the dictator is often the slave of his supporters.

The Constitution was not for King Albert a necessary evil, and he frequently spoke of its "elasticity" and of the wide scope it gave to the people's energy. Had he, at Lophem, or a few days later at Brussels, accomplished his *coup d'état*, he would have alienated the sympathies which he had so successfully enlisted since the beginning of his reign. He would have wrecked, at one blow, the patient work of the last ten years. He would have justified the unfair accusations levelled at the monarchy before his Accession to the throne. He would have divided the Nation against herself and been obliged to maintain internal peace through methods which were both foreign to his nature and repugnant to his conscience. It would have been a sad conclusion to the great epic of the last four years, had the defender of Law in international relations become the violator of Law in internal affairs. No material or political advantage would have been sufficient compensation for such failure.

### (C) Brussels

(1) Meanwhile, the evacuation of Belgian territory by the German armies was proceeding apace.

On November 20th, the Sovereigns re-entered Antwerp.

The strange spectacle of the deserted Scheldt and empty docks showed how completely trade had been stifled by the War, how urgent was the need of economic restoration. But if the stream seemed to have lost its busy traffic, the town was extraordinarily animated. On the steps of the cathedral, Cardinal Mercier was waiting for the King. After exchanging a few words with him, he led the way towards the altar. It was their first meeting since the War. In spite of the solemnity of the surroundings, the congregation could not restrain their enthusiasm. The great Gothic nave resounded with cheers such as it had probably never heard before.

As soon as the Armistice had been signed, the Germans had obtained permission from the Dutch Government to cross Limburg. Their 4th Army retreated towards Maesycck and, after depositing their arms, passed through Dutch territory on their way back to Germany. The 6th Army passed through Liège, and the Allied troops followed closely in order to take their stand on the Rhine, the Belgians between the Dutch frontier and Neuss, the British and French from Neuss to Coblenz, and the Americans and French from Coblenz to Switzerland. The Royal entry into Brussels, which had been delayed by these movements, took place on November 22nd.

Before reaching his Capital, King Albert had been able to form some idea of the state in which the enemy had left Belgium. He could but contrast the wrecked railway lines, choked canals, deserted fields, half-destroyed villages and flooded rivers, with the prosperous and well-ordered aspect of Flanders and Brabant in pre-War days. This sight only confirmed his first impression: "What destruction!" How many years would it take to heal such wounds? He was comforted, however, at the time, by the thought that the damage was purely material. The spirit of the people was sound enough, and he never felt so much at one with them. It was not merely the cheers given to a victorious army, but a genuine homecoming, a material reunion where there had never been any spiritual disunion.

The rejoicing of the crowd, the look of recognition and devotion in every face, confirmed his fond belief that "victory would wipe out everything."

Official receptions did not impress him so much as the thousand tokens of affection given him on all sides. Almost every window was crowded with objects hidden from the Germans; portraits of the Royal Family, tricolour cockades, medallions, even brass pots and pans and woollen mattresses which had been hidden to escape requisitions. It was as if every citizen wished to show that he "had done his bit" and run some risk for the common cause. Belgian and allied soldiers were received with open arms, and the last precious stores raided to make them welcome. Wine bottles were unearthed from the gardens, the last chickens were killed, money was spent recklessly. It was not "to-morrow we die," but "to-morrow we live." It was a long-expected miracle; the end of physical suffering and moral misery; the opening of a new era, of a land of plenty. Never was there such a mad feast among such sad surroundings.

For every house bore the stain of war. Even Brussels which, owing to the presence of Ministers of neutral Powers, had been comparatively spared, had a dismal look. Everything was in disrepair, grass growing in the streets, disjointed pavements, water-stained frontages. Owing to the seizure of brass articles, all plates and knobs had been taken from the doors, and the finest mansions could only boast a piece of wire in place of a bell-pull. The city, which formerly looked so cheerful and elegant, with its spacious modern suburbs, its aristocratic quarter in the French style of the eighteenth century, and its incomparable Gothic and Renaissance buildings towering over narrow streets, bore a thousand signs of neglect and poverty. But here, at least, due warning had been given and some preparations could be made. Flags and banners helped to hide the wounds.

(2) The King and Queen had followed almost the same road on the day of their Accession, when it had been

written that "Brussels would never see such a demonstration again." It was then a prosperous and healthy crowd. The young King wore the cocked hat, embroidered coat, and white breeches of a general's full uniform in 1909. He now appeared in simple and austere khaki; on his head, hard steel had taken the place of ostrich feathers. His face was tanned and lined; he had gone through fire. His people also had had their ordeal; their clothes appeared worn out in spite of pathetic efforts to look their best in honour of their Sovereign; the mark of war was on their faces and showed even in their feverish excitement.

The scene has often been described. To an observer, unaware of the events of the last four years, it would have appeared incredible. Who could have dreamt of American, British and French detachments parading through the rue Royale? How could the Queen and the Princess ride side by side with the Prince of Wales at the head of Belgian troops? Since when did Belgian crowds sing their *Brabançonne* with such heart-rending earnestness? Why these tragic cheers, and why, on both sides of the street, this long file of stretcher-bearers, carrying to relief stations hundreds of fainting people unable to stand the strain? If he had been told that this was a Sovereign re-entering his Capital after four years of uninterrupted struggle, this observer would have been equally puzzled by the King's grave expression, for his emotion was too strong to allow him to drop the mask.

Later in the day, the atmosphere relaxed and a joyful reaction set in. There was a meeting at the Town Hall, where Albert I could be seen, smiling and talking familiarly with Cardinal Mercier, almost as tall as himself in his red robes, and small Burgomaster Max, undaunted by his long captivity—a contrast recalling Landseer's "Dignity and Impudence"—a most unconventional gathering, in which the Sovereign met for the first time, after their long separation, the brave lawyers, magistrates, doctors, professors, members of the *Comité d'Alimentation*, who each in his sphere had fought famine and discouragement.

Outside, the historical Grand' Place was filled with a motley crowd in which the blue and khaki of French and British uniforms dotted the black mass of the citizens' Sunday best. When, in answer to their call, the King appeared on the balcony, that sombre carpet was suddenly lit up with thousands of white faces turned towards him, and the air was once more rent with acclamations, louder and ever louder. The people, feeling that their shouts were keeping him there, and wishing to see more and more of him, prolonged their cry, until their hoarseness and exhaustion allowed him to retire. Songs broke out, the *Brabançonne*, and the *Marseillaise* in honour of the French, and in honour of the British, not the National Anthem, but "Tipperary"—and never did it sound so strange as in that old square of Brabant, very different from Leicester Square, hummed rather than sung by those who knew the tune without understanding the words. Its quickened rhythm prompted the people to dance, or rather to hop about, since there was no room for dancing. Children and women in danger of being stifled, were raised in the arms of the strong. One stalwart Highlander in particular, provoked great merriment by hoisting onto his broad shoulders a frail old lady who, completely losing her head, conducted the proceedings with a dilapidated umbrella.<sup>1</sup>

(3) These were only some of the external aspects of the great return. Its deep meaning was finer and simpler, nothing less than the amazing experience of a dream come true, the complete and satisfying realization of an ideal.

One medal struck during the occupation with the profile of the King and Queen bore the inscription: "Our place is with you at the front." Their pictures were in every home, and the children who were too young to remember them were taught to pray for them. Persecution only exasperated the people's wounded loyalty. Since the National Fête could only be celebrated in the churches, even the un-

<sup>1</sup> Witnessed by the A.

believer found his way there. The image of the Soldier King, the champion of freedom, the embodiment of all that was best in the country, filled all hearts and became the greatest comfort in times of adversity. Any bad news concerning the War, every new privation and humiliation was countered by the words: "When the King comes home." He was expected almost as a redeemer. The legend planted in the mud of the Yser spread and grew in every Belgian town and village. If the soldiers, who saw him so often and from whom he claimed such heavy sacrifices, were able to idealize him, what picture could not be evoked by the over-excited imagination of an oppressed population, cut off from the rest of the world, confined to their houses and brooding endlessly over their grievances in the present and their hopes in the future.\*

"What one knew of him," writes M. Nothomb, "had been meditated, what one could not know had been felt, divined or conjectured. Everyone had literally lived his King, had built him according to his character, his past actions, the fragments gathered of his legend, as splendid as possible, as he was bound to be. The people shut in cities and villages had, day by day, and feature by feature drawn and re-drawn his aspect, in order to fix it more deeply in their hearts. . . . It was a dangerous trial; he stood it fully, for the same sorrow and the same hope had ripened him, and made him such as he was dreamt to be. Those who waited and he who came had reached the same point."

There is no exaggeration in these lines. King Albert's return was a unique experience, for himself and for his people. The realization of an ideal does not often occur in individual life. It is so exceptional in the life of a nation as to be almost overwhelming. For many days the emotion which gripped the people's throat never relaxed. It was still increased by the physical condition to which they had been reduced. The long files of stretcher-bearers, along

\* See pp. 243-245.

the rue Royale, told a plain and sad story; many who had survived the sufferings of oppression succumbed after deliverance.

Even in this hour of triumph the King's wisdom did not desert him. He knew that peace would not fulfil his people's hopes and that his country, instead of resting on her laurels and reaping the benefits of her sacrifice, would have to work hard and long before normal life could be restored. Abroad, the fate of Belgium must depend largely upon the decision of the Allied Powers and on the course of events in Europe which he had no means of controlling. At home, he became again a constitutional Monarch, and in spite of his exceptional prestige, might be unable to obtain the urgent and drastic measures which the hour required.

If such foreboding crossed his mind, it could not mar the deep satisfaction which he felt riding through Brussels, at the head of his faithful troops, and listening to the shouts of the crowd from the balcony of the Hôtel de Ville. He was not dependent on popularity, but he appreciated it as much as any man. He lived in the present as well as in the past and in the future. From August 1914 to this day, his army had followed him; now he realized that his people had also been at one with him all through the struggle. Their unbounded loyalty proved that there had been only one will and one soul throughout Belgium, and that he had succeeded in expressing it. That was enough. If tomorrow brought fresh troubles, he would be prepared to meet them in his own way and in his own time. Nothing could ever take away the glory of that hour.

(4) The first words of his great speech in Parliament, on the same day, ring like the exordium of a Roman oration: "Gentlemen, I bring you the greeting of the army. We have come from the Yser, my soldiers and I, through our towns and our liberated countryside, and here am I before the representatives of the country—*et me voici devant les représentants du pays.*" Extraordinary words

from this simple man, who always clothed his thoughts in plain, clear language, and seemed purposely to avoid eloquence. But the moment also was extraordinary, and the King seems to have been carried away by its greatness.

After wielding the Executive power for four years and winning for himself an unprecedented prestige and popularity, he was going to abdicate. The Chief of the Yser would henceforth efface himself before Parliament and become again, with his ministers, the servant of the Nation. At that moment of renunciation he addressed the Belgian Chamber as a Consul returning to Rome at the head of his legions might have addressed the Senate: "and here am I."

He continued in the same tone, as a true servant of the *Res Publica*: "Four years ago, you entrusted me with the national army, in order to defend the country in peril. I come to render you an account of my acts. I come to tell you what the soldiers of Belgium have been, the endurance they showed, the courage and daring they displayed, the great results obtained by their efforts."

Soon, however, he reverted to his usual style, while explaining the rules which determined his conduct as Commander-in-Chief: first, "to fulfil, within the limit of possibility, Belgium's international obligations," and, secondly, "to spare the blood of her soldiers, ensure their material and moral well-being and alleviate their sufferings."

Every decision taken and instruction issued from the beginning of hostilities to the Armistice can be explained in the light of these two guiding principles, the retreat on Antwerp, the two sorties, the refusal to take part in premature offensives, the stand on the Yser, the work of reorganization, and finally, the country's liberation. There is the same continuity in the leader's conception of his military duties as in that of his constitutional responsibilities. Everything is determined by clear, simple ideas. There is no shadow in the picture, no mystery. It appears like a fresco on a bright wall.

After relating the military operations, year by year, the King paid homage to the Allied Powers who answered his appeal as guarantors of neutrality and to those who joined in later and helped to deliver the oppressed country: "I have another duty to fulfil in bearing witness to the fine military virtues of the allied troops who fought in Belgium in brotherly union with our own, animated by the same ideal and the same spirit of sacrifice. Honour to the soldiers of France, Great Britain and the United States, who came to our rescue. I bow reverently before those who died and who rest in our country's soil which they made for ever sacred. Grateful Belgium will keep alive and treasure their glorious memory."

It was the longest speech he ever made, and he must have prepared it carefully, as he did all his important speeches. He wished to express his gratitude to all, and he seems to have been particularly anxious not to forget anyone, and to avoid hurting the feelings of some unknown friend: not only the army, but also the civilians who suffered under German oppression, first of all, the relatives of the soldiers who had remained for so long without news, then those who had devoted themselves to relief work, women as well as men, those women who "showed once more what can be expected of their goodness and of the intuition which makes them discover the wound which needs healing and the pain which must be alleviated."

Suffering endured in common had been, during the occupation, the nation's patrimony; confidence had been preserved to the end. How could the bonds of solidarity now be broken: "It would be unbelievable that the fruitful union of which the Belgians have given such an admirable example during the War, should give way, on the morrow of the liberation of their territory, to a renewal of sterile quarrels. Such union must remain a reality."

The preservation of national co-operation was the main theme of the King's solemn advice to his people in this critical hour of history. It was indispensable in order to

pursue with success the work of reconstruction, to clear the wreckage of war, rebuild industries, restore trade and finance. No division could be allowed to jeopardize this urgent task. Creeds and opinions must be respected, but union must be preserved between believers and unbelievers, employers and employees, Flemish and French-speaking citizens. As a token of his policy of national union, the new Government, including men of the three political parties, had placed on its programme general suffrage at the age of twenty-one, and the creation of a Flemish University at Gheut: "Equality in suffering and endurance has created equal rights. . . . The practice of religion . . . has never been in the army an obstacle to comradeship; how could such differences be the cause of division in civil and political life?" Economic solidarity necessitates "a loyal alliance between Capital and Labour and a fair distribution of the product of common efforts." A fruitful union implies "the sincere collaboration of all the children of the same country, without distinction of origin or language." In this respect the strictest equality and justice will inspire "the legislation of the new Government."

The conclusion of the speech brings together the two great principles which dominated the King's policy, the preservation and defence of international law, and the development of democratic institutions, safeguarding the interests of every group of the community: "By her constancy, her stoicism, the heroism of her army and of her population, Belgium has conquered the sympathies and admiration of the world. She has become in all eyes, the sacred expression of the cause of Right." And further: "Order is the basis of social life . . . but fruitful order does not depend on forced submission or the effects of external constraint, it must rest on the common agreement of hearts and wills. Thus the spirit of fraternity and concord appears to be as much a civic duty as the respect of public order. To work, then, Gentlemen! God help you

to make Belgium a country ever more united and ever more worthy to be cherished by her children."

While re-reading this plain and clear declaration which, at the time, received unanimous approval, it is difficult to understand how any of the King's supporters could ever have misinterpreted his intentions. Before, during and after the War, his attitude remained perfectly consistent. If for four years he used the extraordinary powers which the Constitution allowed him to exercise in exceptional circumstances, it was merely because he was fighting for the preservation of international law and for the sacredness of treaties. He never dissociated, in his mind, internal from external affairs, and opposed instinctively any breach of national or international order. But such order was only valid if it rested on the freewill of citizens and nations. It became an intolerable tyranny if it was imposed from outside, either by a dictator on his subjects or by the hegemony of one nation, or group of nations, on others.

In ascending the throne, King Albert had declared that he had "a very clear vision of his task." That vision never altered, and even the turmoil of the World War and the ordeal of 1914 did not disturb its harmony. A mere soldier, after appreciating for four years the advantages of military discipline, might have deemed it useful to apply the same method after the conclusion of peace. King Albert was not merely a good general, he was also a statesman and a philosopher. The statesman believed in constitutionalism and the philosopher in the freedom and dignity of man. His course was traced beforehand and he never hesitated, either at Lophem or at Brussels. Had he been a farmer like Cincinnatus, he would have gone back to the plough. Being a constitutional King, he went back to his study, and after being Commander, became again Counsellor.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Reconstruction (1918-1933)

#### (A) *Versailles and After*

(1) THE voluntary abdication of power at a time when its exercise might solve many difficulties, needs a strong will and a keen sense of duty, but greater qualities are required from a king when he has to submit to decisions imposed upon him by foreign statesmen, and to see the interests of his country, which had been placed in the forefront of their war aims, give way to new interests and recede into the background.

Had the War been brought to a conclusion in 1916, there is no doubt that Belgium would have played an important part in the peace negotiations. The spontaneous declaration of *Sainte Adresse* was still fresh in all minds, and had not yet been overshadowed by new diplomatic engagements. The Belgian cause had been one of the most telling weapons in the Allies' armoury when they justified their attitude before neutrals. It remained to the last a stumbling-block to all attempts made to bring about a premature solution of the conflict. But as soon as the Armistice was signed, the victorious nations were swept by an irresistible wish to satisfy their ambitions at the expense of the vanquished, and to receive compensations for the losses they had suffered during the prolonged struggle. This reaction was bound to influence the representatives of the big Powers, who had also to satisfy the claims of a number of old and new nationalities, beside which Belgian questions dwindled into insignificance.

The Allies' attitude was not purely inspired by selfish motives. In many instances, it was associated with a

genuine enthusiasm for the grandiose plan, elaborated by President Wilson, to put an end to international conflicts by the creation of the League of Nations. There was indeed a close connection between the spirit of the Covenant and the motive which inspired King Albert in resisting the German aggression. The respect of international treaties is the necessary condition for the development of a system which would abolish neutrality by neutralizing the whole world. But the concrete application made by Belgium of such principles in 1914 faded in the light of post-War idealism. The violation of Belgian neutrality belonged to the past, and people, in those days, lived in the future.

The King did not expect to sit at the Conference table, but he certainly hoped that his representatives who had been invited and even urged to join in previous diplomatic transactions, should be called upon to participate in the Peace negotiations. He also hoped that, in consideration of the special position occupied by Belgium and of her exceptional sacrifices, she would not be obliged to press her claims unduly on the reluctant attention of those who had so readily acknowledged her right to full restoration and compensations.

If he was disappointed, he bore his disappointment with remarkable patience and dignity. His knowledge of history, his sense of proportion—and no doubt also his sense of humour—allowed him to watch the course of negotiations with philosophy. He possessed the gift of recognizing the inevitable and submitting to it with a good grace. He never wasted his energy on a hopeless attempt to achieve the impossible or on vain protests against events which were beyond his reach. He knew what he could do, in his own kingdom. If he was ever prompted to criticize, it was because others did not always realize their limitations in the same way.

This attitude is illustrated by a letter, hitherto unpublished, addressed to the Prime Minister, M. Delacroix,

on June 29th 1919, after the signature of the Peace Treaty.<sup>1</sup>

MY DEAR MINISTER,

Peace is signed. It does not yet bring to Belgium the full satisfaction to which the achievements of her soldiers and the indomitable resistance of her population seemed to give her a right.

Such as it is, however, the Treaty of Versailles is going to be the basis of the political and social régime under which our Country must be raised from her ruins.

The work of restoration began, on the morrow of the Armistice, among many hopes and great incertitudes. It will now be pursued among sterner perspectives but on a well-defined ground, favourable to strong and clear resolutions.

The hour has come for an immense and combined effort from all.

Everyone must develop the consciousness of his duties of discipline and solidarity towards the community. Increased production, better equipment, improved methods of material and intellectual labour and a systematic search for commercial outlets will provide sources of new wealth for the good of all. Economy in public and private affairs, sacrifice of all expenses which are not indispensable to the maintenance of the Nation's physical and intellectual health, will prevent the waste of our too weak resources.

The gravity of present circumstances, understood by all, will again give to the Belgian people, who have recovered their freedom, the high moral standard which has been their strength under enemy occupation.

Let us assert before all, our will to build up a finer Belgium. The faith which we have in ourselves will inspire confidence to the great friendly Powers.

Let us call the whole people to work and to the

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced by kind permission of Madame Delacroix.

fulfilment of civic duty. The Government appreciates its responsibilities, Parliament is ready to co-operate in the task, the Press will uphold this public patriotic effort.

I wish, my dear Minister, to assure you that I am whole-heartedly with all Belgian citizens at the moment when they are preparing themselves for the great work of peace and restoration.

Believe me,

Your very affectionate,

ALBERT.

(2) After some delay the first plenary session of the Peace Conference was summoned in Paris on January 18th 1919.

After the entry of America into the struggle, most nations which were not under the direct threat of German arms, had declared war against the Central Powers or broken off diplomatic relations. Among them were countries like Cuba, Siam, Liberia, China, Brazil, and a number of South American Republics, which only suffered from the submarine campaign and had made no contribution to the military effort of the Allies. There were thus twenty-seven States of the Entente represented at the Conference, and it appeared necessary to leave the final decisions in the hands of a Supreme Council, to which the reports of the various committees were submitted. This Council of Ten was later reduced to the Big Four, *i.e.* President Wilson, Mr. Lloyd George, M. Clémenceau and M. Orlando, Japan's collaboration being only required on special occasions.

This distinction between Powers of "general" and "restricted" interests is justified by M. Tardieu, the close collaborator of M. Clémenceau, in his book on the Peace Treaty. "Among the victors," he writes, "some had given everything, their soil, their blood, their treasure not only to defend their own liberties, but to win liberty for others.

The latter, on the contrary, despite the endurance of long sufferings, owed their resurrection entirely to the former. A classification was thus essential."<sup>1</sup> If it was justified with regard to the States which had taken no active share in the military operations, it certainly did not apply to Belgium, Serbia and the Dominions. The interests of the latter could, however, be voiced at the Supreme Council by the British Premier, while the two former had only the poor comfort of being allotted, with Brazil, three delegates at the plenary session, against two or one given to other nations.

There was evidently, on the part of the representatives of the Principal Powers, a genuine desire to hasten proceedings on account of the unsettled situation in Europe, the urgency of early demobilization and the wish to return as soon as possible to their respective countries, in order to keep in closer contact with public opinion. This was made plain by the retort of M. Clémenceau to Sir Robert Borden on January 25th, in which, alluding to that "very great, very august, and at times very imperious force called public opinion," he said: "It will not ask us if such and such a State was represented on such and such a commission. That is of no interest to anybody. Public opinion will ask us what we have done." The main preoccupation of the Supreme Council was to come to an agreement and to obtain Germany's signature as early as possible. While the diplomats in Vienna took fifteen months to settle the conditions of European peace, the Versailles negotiators managed to remodel the world in a little more than five.

It is easy to understand that, in such an atmosphere, the Belgian delegates had some difficulty in making their voices heard. MM. Hymans, Vandervelde and van den Heuvel, chosen among the leaders of the three principal parties, found themselves placed from the first in a difficult and even painful situation, which did not correspond to the part played by Belgium during the War. Beside being kept in the antechamber of the Conference, they were scarcely

<sup>1</sup> *The Truth about the Treaty*, 1921.

allowed the time to state their case. On February 11th, they were granted an audience by the Supreme Council and were given three hours to explain the very intricate problems on the solution of which the future of their country depended. They were not called into consultation whenever Belgian questions came under discussion, and the scraps of information they received were due to chance or indiscretion.<sup>1</sup>

(3) The two main questions to be solved were the revision of the 1839 Treaties and Reparations.

It will be remembered that, as long as hostilities lasted, Belgium had not renounced her neutral status,<sup>2</sup> but it was generally agreed that the old régime, which had failed to protect her against aggression, could not be maintained. The country had been seriously hampered in her military preparations owing to the impossibility of combining efforts with the Powers who wished to maintain her independence against the Powers which threatened it. This was considered as the main cause of the failure to repel the German invasion and of the ordeal of the occupation. The Belgians felt that this restriction on the country's sovereignty should be removed and that she should be placed henceforth in a position to choose her own friends and to take all measures necessary for safeguarding her independence, like any other European State. Besides, the old neutrality implied a fresh guarantee from Germany, and what was still more difficult to accept at the time, the diplomatic "tutelage" of that Power.

The abrogation of neutrality did not meet with any opposition, but it raised a series of difficult problems, for it implied the revision of the 1839 treaties which had placed Belgium in a defenceless position through the loss of part of Limburg and Luxembourg and through the fact that the mouth of the Scheldt remained under Dutch sovereignty.

<sup>1</sup> C. Terlinden: *Le Traité de Versailles et le Livre de M. Tardieu.* (*Revue Générale*, 1921.)

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 264–267.

This had prevented the British from slipping reinforcements to Antwerp, and might again, if ever history repeated itself, diminish the strategical value of that fortified position.

For months an agitation had been conducted, in certain Belgian quarters, for the aggrandizement of Belgian territory and for obtaining the left bank of the Scheldt.<sup>1</sup> This was not, however, the position adopted by the Belgian delegates. In stating their case before the Supreme Council, on February 11th, they contented themselves with explaining the difficulties which would face the country after the abrogation of neutrality, leaving the Powers to decide how and when these difficulties could be removed. If the lost territories and the mouth of the Scheldt had been under German sovereignty, the solution of the problem would have been simple enough, but the King and his representatives fully realized that no claims could be made against Holland, who had remained neutral during the conflict. They wished the Allies to use their influence to obtain for Belgium new guarantees of security, particularly on the Scheldt and in Limburg, which, by improving her defensive system, would compensate her for the loss of the legal guarantee given her by the 1839 treaties. They considered that, after the experience of the War, some means ought to be found to reinforce Antwerp from the sea and to protect the vulnerable frontier of the Meuse.

The Commission of Belgian Affairs appointed to examine this question adopted a resolution in favour of revision. Negotiations should be started "to liberate Belgium from the limitation of sovereignty imposed upon her by the treaties of 1839, and to suppress, as much for her sake as for that of peace in general, the various risks and inconveniences resulting from the said treaties." This resolution was unanimously adopted, on March 8th, by the Supreme Council.

After Holland had joined in the negotiations at the invitation of the Allied Powers, the latter decided, on June 4th, that a solution of the problem must be found

<sup>1</sup> See p. 265.

which did not imply any transfer of sovereignty. In spite of the fact that this proviso made a satisfactory settlement extremely difficult, if not impossible, Belgium accepted it without protest. She had placed her case before the Powers and was resolved to abide by their decision.

M. Tardieu contends that the failure of these negotiations was due to President Wilson's attitude and to the fact that "the Belgian case was put forward with hesitation, premises being presented and no conclusions drawn." Similar criticisms were directed against the Belgian delegates by some of their compatriots. King Albert, however, always defended his representatives and the moderation with which they stated their country's position.

(4) Belgian interests did not fare much better in the Commission dealing with Reparations. In this matter, Belgium was a privileged creditor. This had been recognized in President Wilson's Fourteen Points and several diplomatic documents published during the War, not excepting the Declaration of Sainte Adresse. But when M. van den Heuvel requested an exceptional treatment for his country, he met with strong opposition, the majority of the delegates urging that all nations ought to be treated on the same footing and that, if special claims had to be examined, general agreement would become impossible. It was vain for the Belgian representatives to urge that, war having been forced upon their country, she could not be expected to pay for the cost of its prosecution; that for four years she had been compelled to raise loans in order to protect her population from famine; and that, if she had to wait for her share in German reparations, she could not possibly undertake the urgent reconstruction of her devastated areas and the restoration of her wrecked industries. Their request met with no success. On March 29th, they drew up the following Note: "Belgium does not overlook the demands for reparations that may be presented by other Powers, but she thinks she may legitimately claim

that her special position should be taken into account and her recovery facilitated."

Towards the end of February, Colonel House, who realized how essential it was for the ruined country to obtain immediate financial relief, had suggested to M. Hymans, in a private conversation, that a clause might be introduced into the preliminaries of Peace, providing for the immediate payment of a sum on account of War damages. This "priority" would have allowed Belgium to satisfy her most urgent needs, even before the final signature of the Peace Treaty. The two statesmen agreed on a sum of 2500 million gold francs, and Colonel House undertook to approach Mr. Balfour and M. Klotz, the French Minister, on the subject. The idea of concluding a preliminary settlement was given up, but Colonel House's suggestion proved most useful and remained in the forefront of Belgian policy.<sup>1</sup>

No substantial progress, however, was made, and when the reparation question passed into the hands of the Big Four, the Belgian Delegation, who could not obtain a hearing, grew seriously alarmed at the course of events.<sup>2</sup> It was at that critical moment that King Albert decided to intervene.

(5) It was certainly not the King's intention to make a dramatic protest. As early as October 1914, he had warned M. Destrée that "the course of events would push Belgium into the background." How could he wonder at the realization of his prophecy under present circumstances? He never lost sight of the fact that if the claims of his country were not at present treated with the attention they deserved, she nevertheless owed the Allies a great debt of gratitude. He agreed with M. Hymans that while, "in the defence of the common cause of civilization and right, Belgium had had her share, the Allies also had played an

<sup>1</sup> P. Hymans: *L'Histoire de notre Priorité*, *Le Soir*, December 1921.

<sup>2</sup> From March 26th to March 30th, M. Hymans, chief Belgian delegate, had been in active correspondence with M. Delacroix in Brussels. The idea of approaching the King and asking him to use his personal influence seems to have been suggested simultaneously in Paris and Brussels.

unforgettable part in the liberation of Belgian territory." The bonds of solidarity which linked Belgium to Great Britain and France when her existence was threatened could not and should not be loosened after the struggle. He came, therefore, not as a plaintiff, but as a friend.

He flew to Paris and, in order to avoid official receptions, stayed in Versailles at the *Hôtel des Reservoirs*. On April 1st, he had a long interview with M. Clémenceau. Two days later, he saw the Big Three.<sup>1</sup> The report which he drew up of this interview cannot yet be published; when it is, it will be found that although several questions relating to the revision of the 1839 Treaties came under discussion, it was mainly on the ground of Reparations that the King made his appeal. The future of Belgium depended on her right of priority. If he did not receive assurances on this point, the work of reconstruction to which he was devoting himself was in jeopardy. "I won on that day," he is reported to have said a few months later, "my first diplomatic success. It was a hard fight. At one moment I was told rather sharply that Belgium wished to impose excessive sacrifices on the Allies. I could not help replying: 'These sacrifices are the consequence of the Belgians' faithfulness to their promise. I ask you to keep yours.' We rose somewhat moved. The case was won. We had our 2500 million gold francs."

This statement seems grossly exaggerated. The Sovereign may have expressed his satisfaction in general terms before leaving Paris, and come back to Brussels in a more confident frame of mind, but he did not allude to his "success" and never mentioned the exact amount of priority payment obtained by Belgium. There is no doubt, however, that his visit paved the way for the negotiations which took place three weeks later and largely contributed to their satisfactory conclusion. Once more, he succeeded in keeping his temper under strong provocation.

<sup>1</sup> The meeting took place at the invitation of the Allied representatives. It was not a formal sitting, but a "conversation," and it was agreed that M. Hymans, as Belgian Foreign Minister, should be present.

On April 23rd, the Belgian representatives were summoned to a meeting where they found their Serbian, Portuguese and Brazilian colleagues. They were informed of the principal clauses of the treaty concerning War indemnities. The right of priority was not mentioned. After further protests, the Belgian delegates were finally granted an audience by the Big Three, on April 29th, at the Hôtel Bischöffsheim. "The discussion was long and painful," writes M. Hymans; "I declared that we would not accept the responsibility of bringing back to Belgium a treaty which did not grant us a privileged position. M. van den Heuvel supported my argument with his usual clearness and legal precision. M. Vandervelde wound up the debate; with strong and sober eloquence, he spoke in the name of the Belgian working classes. The sitting was suspended; experts gathered in groups in the vast drawing-room. A proposal was made to us and discussion was resumed. I maintained that we could not accept it and that the Belgian Government would have to submit the question to Parliament. Attempts were made to convince us, but we persisted. I announced that I did not know if I should be present at the sitting in which the Germans would be handed the projected Treaty. A second interruption followed, and again the experts conferred together. After a long parley, a proposal was agreed upon giving Belgium a double privilege: the priority of 2500 millions, and the remission of her War debts. In agreement with our own experts, we decided to accept. . . . The offer was approved by the Council assembled at the Palace under the presidency of the King."

The discussion seems to have been even more heated than this account suggests. At one time, the Belgian representatives were urged to give way for the sake of union. At another, they were told that their demands were out of proportion to the casualties of their army.

The importance of the priority payment granted to Belgium cannot be exaggerated. These 2500 million gold

francs, representing a much larger sum at the present rate, were paid integrally and were not subjected to the successive reductions which affected ordinary reparations. The remission of the War debts to the Allies was also an invaluable concession which restored the country's credit.

Territorially, Belgium remained within her own frontiers. She only recovered a fraction of the Walloon districts taken by Prussia in 1815, a small territory around Eupen and Malmédy with 60,000 inhabitants.

The troops of the Belgian Congo had taken an active part in the conquest of East Africa, and the Treaty of Versailles entrusted Belgium with a mandate over the northern districts of Ruanda and Urundi.

(6) How did King Albert appreciate the Treaty of Versailles? To a journalist who insisted on obtaining his opinion, he answered. "What would you have? They did what they could."<sup>1</sup> This does not show much enthusiasm, and there is some evidence that the King regretted that the chief delegates should not have been better informed with regard to Europe's historical and geographical situation. Speaking to the historian Henri Pirenne of his visit to Paris in 1919, he mentioned the fact that, in the course of the discussion, one of the delegates, while handling a map, did not seem quite aware of its outlines: "I saw with dismay his finger wander through the Rhineland, while he intended to show me the Belgian frontier." He made a similar remark to Claude Farrère, who deplored before him the lack of preparation of certain plenipotentiaries. Such criticisms, however, must not be taken too seriously, since geography was one of the Sovereign's favourite hobbies.

"The fact is," writes M. Dumont-Wilden, "that Albert I fully realized the gaps, the mistakes and the partial injustices of the treaties of 1919, but he possessed, to the highest degree, the sense of possibilities. . . . He knew

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden: *Albert Ier*.

Europe too well not to understand that such considerable changes in the political and territorial status of the old Continent could not but encounter inextricable difficulties."

Having himself exercised "the profession of King" with some success, he could not share the prejudice existing at the time against the Monarchy. Among the illusions which blinded the Allied Statesmen in 1919, none was more deplorable than the confusion they established between democracy, as a form of government, and moral righteousness. It was no doubt flattering for the French and Americans to be told that no evil could ever come from a democratic State, that the majority was always right, and that wars were only caused by the personal ambitions of wicked monarchs and aristocratic cliques. The fact that, in certain circumstances, republics had been as aggressive as monarchies was carefully ignored. This fallacy underlies a number of post-War speeches and declarations. Since the people were the first to suffer from international conflicts, it seemed incredible that any country in which their voice could be heard might engage in an aggressive policy. Tsardom had gone, German Imperialism was safely exiled with the Kaiser in Holland; the break-up of the Dual Monarchy would complete the work.

For King Albert, security did not depend so much on the external form of government as on its internal structure and on the political education of the people. He knew that the British Empire, for instance, was more pacific than the most democratic republic. He also knew by experience that a constitutional sovereign was able to exert a restraining influence on popular passions and strengthen the rule of law instead of weakening it. A sound Constitution, whatever its external form, was to him the best safeguard against nationalist excesses, and he could but deplore that the policy pursued at Versailles did not sufficiently take into account certain traditional features of European history.

The almost total annihilation of Austria, which could

no longer act as a counterpoise to Germany, was fraught with dangers which he lived long enough to appreciate. The substitution in place of the old monarchies of a number of republics which could easily be, and as a matter of fact promptly were, converted into dictatorships, was not perhaps the best means of restoring peace in a troubled world.

Speaking to M. de Lichervelde, in February 1921, he mentioned that Comte de Broqueville "had been the only one, during the War, to realize that Belgium must wish for a peace which would restore the balance in Europe. He understood the importance of the Austrian offer. . . . Unless we return to some equilibrium, disarmament will be impossible."<sup>1</sup>

These last words are significant and must be connected with the speech of August 4th 1914, in which the Sovereign mentioned "the necessity of Belgian independence for the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe."

The fact that War broke out in 1914 was no proof that the system established in 1830 was radically wrong, but that it could not work successfully unless strict regulations prevented ambitious Powers from forcing the pace of armaments and obtaining a lead which would give them some chance of surprising their opponents when "the day" came. Equilibrium of forces was not an obstacle to disarmament; it was the very condition of its practical realization. Once more, recent events seem to confirm the King's opinion.

(7) The Belgians were not at first enthusiastic supporters of the League of Nations. Having lived isolated for four years, they had had little opportunity of acquainting themselves with the main principles which inspired the Covenant. They were besides disappointed that their offer of giving a home to the League had been turned down, and that Geneva had been preferred to Brussels. King Albert did his best to remove these prejudices and, on more than

<sup>1</sup> *Revue Générale*, March 1934.

one occasion, showed his interest in the work of the Belgian League of Nations' Union which endeavoured to educate public opinion and to promote a better understanding of the work pursued at Geneva.

In November 1930, this society organized a special propaganda week and obtained from the King an autograph message supporting their appeal for new members: "It is to be wished," he wrote, "that the *Union Belge pour la Société des Nations* should count in our country as large a number of adherents as possible, so that the Government should find in the Society a more powerful support for the peaceful and moderate policy which it pursues at Geneva. If they succeed in combining their efforts, small States such as Belgium are perhaps called upon to play a special part in international organization, which must be consolidated if the peril which threatens European civilization is to be removed. It is the duty of public opinion to support our Government in this matter."

The King was as scrupulously sincere in this message as in all his spoken or written declarations. It was not in his nature to pay lip-service to ideals which he considered Utopian or impracticable. He earnestly believed that salvation lay in the organization of international law, and that the best means of avoiding another catastrophe was to establish a system of rules and sanctions which would prevent any future aggressor from challenging it. From this point of view he was in agreement with the promoters and defenders of the League, but this does not mean that he did not wish for improvements in the Covenant and the way in which it was applied.

It had already been made evident in 1930, when this message was written, that the world might one day be divided between members and non-members of the League, or that the League itself might be threatened by a conflict of interests between its principal members. Small States and, more particularly, the small western European States might exert a steady influence, but in present circum-

stances they lack the power and prestige to make their voices heard. Were they to combine, Scandinavia, Holland and Belgium would play a more important part and help to conciliate the conflicting interests of their powerful neighbours.

To criticize the defects of the Covenant without suggesting any improvement was both mischievous and sterile. The best means of preventing the Council from becoming another Holy Alliance was to broaden its basis and to strengthen its peaceful influence by enlisting the support of public opinion in all countries.

The Press was destined to play a prominent part in this great work: "Universal peace and human happiness," wrote the King in the special supplement which *The Times* devoted to Belgium in 1920, "do not only depend on treaties and alliances concluded between Governments. It is the friendly and enlightened appeal from people to people which will make war impossible. . . ."

(8) This policy of co-operation with other States for restoring the balance of economic and political power, preventing the gradual absorption of small nations by their stronger neighbours and averting possible conflicts, was to replace the old neutrality and once more allow Belgium to exert her peaceful influence in Europe. It led the King to support his Government in a series of negotiations which have not yet borne fruit but may one day prove of great importance.

In December 1930 Belgium signed at Oslo, with Denmark, Sweden and Norway, a Convention in which these countries undertook not to raise their tariffs against each other or to introduce new tariffs without stating their reasons for such decision, and giving due warning of their intentions.

On June 20th 1932, King Albert wrote to his Prime Minister, M. Renkin, a letter which must be read in connection with his message to the Belgian League of Nations' Union, quoted above; it reveals his firm intention of giving a lead in order to help Europe out of the increasing diffi-

culties created by economic nationalism. For years, custom barriers had been rising rapidly on every frontier, and the work of political solidarity pursued by the League was threatened by a general tariff war. Experts of various countries had met again and again to denounce this evil and showed, in their reports, that the economic depression could only be relieved by a freer circulation of goods, Capital and Labour.

"Each State," added the Sovereign, "acting independently, has used all the means at its disposal to prevent its own national economy from being affected by the crisis. By the constant increase of custom's duties, sur-taxes and quotas, by the control of trade and exchange, efforts seem to have been made everywhere to reduce imports. The result has been an inevitable reduction of exports.

"The consequences of this restricted policy have been disastrous; it has led, to use the expression of the League of Nations' Financial Commission, to a gradual 'stifling of international trade.'

"For three years the value of international trade has been reduced by half, and this reduction is only partially due to the fall in prices. The contraction of foreign markets has not been compensated by a corresponding expansion of the national market; the latter's capacity of consumption diminishes steadily. During the same period of three years, the number of unemployed has been doubled.

"It has thus been definitely proved that no country is able, through its own means, to alter in its favour the course of economic evolution. A concerted action of the States towards international solidarity can alone cure the grave evils from which the world is suffering.

"It is time that this solidarity should assert itself otherwise than by speeches.

"It seems to me that Belgium should not hesitate to take the initiative which circumstances require, and to secure to this end the help of the States which, like our country, feel keenly the necessity of a change in economic policy.

"I know, my dear Prime Minister, that you and all the members of my Government share my anxieties. I rely on you and your colleagues to take the measures required by an increasingly alarming situation."

This letter which appeared in the Press, is another example of Royal advice given to the people and the Government, this time on an international question. It applies, of course, to the period 1929–1932, and concerns more particularly the continental countries. It shows that the King's policy in international affairs was no less liberal than in social questions, and that a narrow nationalism was as distasteful to him in the economic as in the political field. Far from shirking the international co-operation repeatedly urged by experts, he desired that the League's influence might be strengthened in this respect. Mere words and platonic resolutions did not lead anywhere; he wished his country to act boldly in this matter.

King Albert's letter had at least one concrete result: the conclusion of the Convention signed at Ouchy, in July 1932, between the representatives of Belgium and Luxemburg, on one side, and Holland on the other. It was agreed that the countries concerned would not raise their tariffs against each other or create new duties, and would even reduce progressively existing duties according to a prearranged sliding scale.

The King's hope was that this example should be followed, although he fully realized that circumstances were scarcely favourable at the time. Oslo and Ouchy are almost forgotten; a day may come when they will be remembered.

(9) King Albert's sympathy for the ideals pursued by the League of Nations and his agreement with the main principles laid down by the Covenant, did not blind him to the difficulties with which his country was faced from the point of view of military security.

Now that neutrality had been practically abolished, the

only safeguard which Belgium could seek against the danger of a future aggression, was to be found in Articles 12 and 16 of the Covenant. The latter, dealing with sanctions against any breach of the law similar to that of which Belgium had been recently the victim, seemed particularly unsatisfactory. The unanimity of the Council was required before any action was taken against the law-breaker. The mere severance of trade and financial relations did not provide adequate protection to a small country without any natural frontiers, which would be overrun before the results of economic pressure could seriously affect the invader. The fact that the Council was bound to "recommend" that military protection should be given to the victim of an aggression was not sufficient to allay legitimate apprehensions.

King Albert had been trained by Baron Lambermont in the stern school of realistic diplomacy and did not share the optimistic views of certain statesmen who believed that the establishment of the League would by itself be a sufficient deterrent to war. He had not forgotten the enthusiasm provoked in 1899 by the first International Conference gathered at The Hague for the purpose of limiting armaments. This was also supposed to lead to the abolition of international conflicts, but only brought about the conclusion of a number of agreements regulating "the laws and customs of war," most of which had been violated a few days after the German invasion. After as before the War, Belgium remained a small country, occupying a particularly dangerous position on the map of Europe. Any aggressive policy on her part was unthinkable, but until the League provided her with more definite and concrete safeguards, she could not possibly ignore the necessities of self-defence.

The Covenant did not appear to King Albert an entirely new departure in the world of international politics. After the Napoleonic wars, the Holy Alliance had again and again declared its intention of establishing peace in Europe, and the neutralization of Belgium had been a first step in the right direction. The Hague Conferences had been a second

attempt to prevent a general conflagration after the break-up of the Alliance and the grouping of the European Powers into two opposite camps. The scope of the League of Nations was much wider, but the system had not yet been tested and it was too early to say whether it would develop on the right lines. Some of its supporters insisted on disarmament, others on security. It may safely be stated that King Albert was among the latter, and considered it impossible to ask nations to sacrifice their defensive forces before they were persuaded that the preservation of their independence was secured by other means.

He agreed that the Belgian Army should be considerably reduced after the cessation of hostilities, but always maintained that a certain margin of safety should be preserved. Talking to his ex-Service men on July 20th 1930, he said: "In this terrible War which was imposed upon us, we fought only for our independence and our freedom, but to a proud and courageous people, independence is everything. It is for peace, liberty and honour that we waged war. We fervently hope for universal peace, but the small countries will only be able to disarm without serious danger when the great Powers have given them the example." And again, the next day, on the occasion of the celebration of the Centenary of Belgian independence: "Until the great States have found practical means to put into execution general disarmament, the care of our external security imposes upon us the utmost vigilance, in spite of the happy progress realized by the idea of universal peace."

(10) It was first thought, after Versailles, that a sense of security might be given to Western Europe by a defensive alliance between France, Great Britain and America. The non-ratification of the Treaty by the American Senate having wrecked this project, Belgium was bound to try to consolidate her position by military conventions with her ex-Allies. Her delegates worked unceasingly on the various conferences which succeeded each other, on reparations and

kindred subjects, to preserve the Entente between Great Britain and France. She concluded with the latter, in September 1920, a military convention which was duly registered with the League of Nations. Its character was purely defensive, and the last word, on both sides, remained with Parliament. Its aim was to allow Belgian and French Military Staffs to combine plans in order to prevent the recurrence of the disastrous events of August 1914.

In the minds of Belgian statesmen, this Franco-Belgian Convention should have been completed by an Anglo-Belgian Convention on similar lines. Negotiations were started between Brussels and London which led to the drafting of a treaty, to be signed as soon as Great Britain had concluded a defensive treaty with France. It appeared more and more evident that the future of Belgium depended on the maintenance of close relations between her former guarantors. In an interview given in October 1921, King Albert declared that "peace would be very precarious" if the Allies parted company. "Above all," he added, "we must hope for the continuance of the intimate union between France and England which is sealed by their common trials. Belgium, for her part, will remain faithful to her great brothers in arms and always work, within the limits of her power, to strengthen the bond of union between the two nations which guarantee Peace."

This policy was doomed for a few years to frustration. The King witnessed the failure of the defensive agreement discussed at Cannes in January 1922 between Mr. Lloyd George and M. Briand. A few years later, came the breakdown of the Anglo-French negotiations on reparations and the occupation of the Ruhr which he was not able to prevent.<sup>1</sup> Many months elapsed before constructive statesmanship could once more assert its influence.

This time the German Government took the initiative and, in February 1925, put forward the project of a pact of

<sup>1</sup> Count Sforza in *Revue Belge des Documents*, etc., January–March 1935, p. 480.

mutual guarantee combined with an arbitration convention which led, in December of the same year, to the signature of the Locarno Treaty.

That King Albert supported the Locarno policy may be taken for granted. M. Vandervelde, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, has alluded on several occasions to the consultations which he had with his Sovereign. In an article published by *Le Peuple*, on February 19th 1934, he paid homage to the "invaluable counsels" which he had received from him.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons which determined the King's attitude are self-evident. From a purely Belgian point of view, the new treaty diminished the risk of a German aggression by a detailed and extensive arbitration convention providing for the settlement of all non-political questions. Political questions should be referred to the Council of the League, according to Article 15 of the Covenant. Much more important was the recognition by all the Powers concerned of the territorial *status quo*, and the inviolability of the frontier separating France and Belgium from Germany. The Powers undertook to guarantee this frontier against any aggression and, when the latter appeared to them sufficiently established, were authorized to act even before the Council of the League had rendered its verdict. In the eventuality of a new German aggression, Belgium would thus find at her side not only France and Great Britain, but also Italy.

As M. Vandervelde declared in the Chamber, on January 20th 1926, there was no contradiction between the Franco-Belgian military convention and the Locarno Treaty, since the latter provided for Franco-Belgian military co-operation in the eventuality of an aggression from the East; but the guarantee was no longer one-sided, and Belgium at last received the joint support of her two great Allies, which she had vainly striven to obtain since Versailles.

From a general point of view, the treaty had the great

<sup>1</sup> See in the Appendix (V) the letter concerning the denunciation of the Treaty of 1865 between China and Belgium.

advantage that it broke away from the tradition of military pre-War alliances by giving the guarantee a mutual character. It was, in the words of the Belgian Minister, "a first step towards the integral realization of the Geneva formula, arbitration, security, disarmament."

The Belgians attached special importance to a paragraph of the preamble, stating that the new treaty was the natural consequence of the abrogation of Belgian neutrality and aimed particularly at ensuring peace in the zone "which had been so frequently the scene of international conflicts." This appeared to them as the recognition of the principle which they had vainly defended at Versailles, that neutrality should be replaced by safer and surer guarantees, and was a compensation for the disappointment caused hitherto by their negotiations with Holland for the revision of the treaties of 1839.

In view of later political developments, the enthusiasm provoked by these successful negotiations appears to-day somewhat exaggerated. They did not open a new era "wherein the nations who suffered the scourges of war may work together in a spirit of mutual confidence and prepare the disarmament of hands by the disarmament of hearts."<sup>1</sup> Locarno did not succeed in restoring to Europe her sense of security, but as Sir Austen Chamberlain said at the time, it was only a beginning, a progressive policy towards the peaceful settlement of international conflicts, based on well-defined principles and supported by the joint guarantee of the great Powers. Any agreement which, within the frame of the Covenant, would bind the nations to some concrete undertaking, was far more valuable than vague declarations of principle. Security depended, not so much on the platonic manifestation of pacific intentions as on the amount of confidence which could be attached to them.

<sup>1</sup> M. Vandervelde, on the occasion of the signature of the Treaty.

*(B) Restoring the Country*

(1) On the day of his return to Brussels, the King had called his people to work and, considering the state of exhaustion in which they were at the time, the answer surpassed all expectations.

There was everything to be done. During the retreat the German Army had destroyed bridges and railways over half the country; roads had become impassable; a number of canals were obstructed; circulation was hampered in all directions. Quite apart from the devastated region in West Flanders, many fields had been left fallow and half the cattle removed from the meadows. Nothing had been done to repair the destruction wrought by the invasion and by German terrorism. The whole district between Antwerp and Louvain was dotted with ruins. The region of Liège had suffered heavily, and the devastation extended to Namur and Dinant, and as far as the extreme south of Luxembourg. Apart from 1300 ruined public buildings, the number of houses destroyed or badly damaged was estimated at 100,000, and the problem of housing was made still more urgent by the sudden influx of refugees. The stocks of food and raw material were exhausted and all trade relations with the external world interrupted. But the gravest problem to be faced was the restoration of factories and workshops and the resumption of work in industrial districts.

From the beginning of 1916, the hope entertained by the German civil authorities of preserving Belgian economic activity had been frustrated by the unwillingness of the Belgians to work, and by the determination of the military authorities and the German industrialists to exploit Belgian resources without any regard for the consequences. The former wished only to provide home industry with new means of speeding up war production, but the latter hoped to wreck Belgian equipment in order to eliminate a competitor during the after-War period. Since the deportation of labourers had failed to bring about the expected results,

it was decided to deport the machinery itself and to break up the plant which could not be removed.

The procedure followed was the same. Just as unemployment had been organized in 1916, a general lock-out was enforced in 1917. On February 17th, a decree forbade any work to be carried on without official authorization. Exception was only made for coal mines and works of public utility, such as water supply, gas and electricity. A list of all machines available was drawn up, and six months later the systematic destruction of "condemned works" began.

A large number of machines were taken to pieces and sent to Germany; the framework of the shops were either destroyed or broken up for shrapnel. This labour was carried out in a most wasteful way by soldiers or Russian prisoners, and many more machines were taken away than could be utilized. Iron works were, of course, the first to suffer. Out of thirty-seven blast furnaces existing in the country, twenty-six were ruined; almost all rolling-mills suffered the same fate. At the time of the Armistice, most of the productive plant had disappeared from the districts of Liège and Charleroi.

The German Governor had not been blind to the consequences of this policy, and had been concerned for the future of the country in the eventuality of annexation. He had a report drawn up, in October 1917, which showed that the exports were being carried out at the rate of 50,000 tons per month and that, if they continued for another eighteen months, all plant would have been either removed or destroyed. German experts agreed that two years at least would elapse before activity could be resumed, and valued the damage at anything between 5000 and 8500 millions.

Compared with these devastations, the material damage done to Belgian property during the first weeks of the invasion was of minor importance.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Henri Pirenne: *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale*, p. 206.

(2) The first work to be undertaken was the repair of roads and canals and the reconstruction of about 1500 miles of permanent way and 1000 miles of narrow gauge railways. It was carried out almost entirely by the State, and proceeded so rapidly that six months after the Armistice, the circulation of goods and travellers was re-established all over the country.

In spite of ominous prophecies, the work of restoration undertaken by the Minister of Agriculture was equally successful, owing to the eagerness shown by the refugees to clear the wreckage of war and start cultivation, and to the King's foresight in preparing plans as early as October 1918.<sup>1</sup> Through a wise combination of State help and credits granted to the farmers, out of 90,000 hectares (about 225,000 acres) rendered unfit for cultivation, 69,000 had already been redeemed by May 1921. The population of West Flanders had almost reached pre-War figures. Ypres itself counted 10,600 inhabitants in 1924, compared with 15,000 in 1914. Within three years, the desert which extended over West Flanders was converted into a prosperous land of waving crops and green meadows dotted with cattle; the flooded area was drained, concrete pill-boxes removed, barbed wire entanglements cleared away. Innumerable unexploded shells had to be extracted from the mud before the holes could be levelled and the motor plough run over the ground. Through many ingenious devices, war material was used for agricultural purposes, the explosive taken from the "dud" shells, for instance, being used as fertilizers—an original way of beating swords into ploughshares.

While following these developments with keen interest, King Albert was more directly concerned with the problems of housing and reconstruction which could not be solved so speedily and met with serious difficulties.

<sup>1</sup> When King Albert offered a prize of 25,000 francs for the best report on the restoration of devastated areas (*Revue Belge des Livres, Documentis, etc.*, January–March 1935, p. 485).

As early as September 1916, it had been found necessary to provide the refugees in France and Holland with temporary huts, and the Sovereign had initiated the creation of a special organization for this purpose, the "King Albert Fund." By the end of 1918, the fund was depleted of all resources and unable to provide the refugees who returned to their ruined homes with any accommodation. They were obliged to seek shelter in dilapidated army huts, cellars and even concrete dug-outs, and were exposed to severe hardships during the winter months.

From the beginning of 1919, however, the King Albert Fund received Government subsidies amounting to 110 million francs, to which must be added gifts in money and in kind from Belgium and abroad. Thanks to these new resources, the old huts were moved from Holland and France to the stricken districts, and a number of new ones built, 5000 by the end of 1919, 12,600 two years later, not counting 800 large shelters used as churches, town halls and schools. The fund also undertook to furnish these huts and to provide beds and mattresses for their inhabitants.

Those who travelled through Belgium during those years, will remember the low wooden dwellings which surrounded Ypres, Furnes, Dixmude and many other ruined towns, as far as Dinant. Though simple in the extreme, they were looked upon at the time as a great boon by those who had to wait for months until architects and masons had completed their task. The huts disappeared ten years ago, but many Belgians have not forgotten the months which they spent in them as their King's guests.

The Sovereign exerted a personal influence in speeding up the difficult work of reconstruction.

In April 1919, Parliament passed a law providing for the adoption by the State of devastated Communes and giving the widest powers to six High Commissioners, whose headquarters were at Ostend, Bruges, Ypres, Ghent, Mons and Liège. These Commissioners and their sub-Commissioners were nominated by the King and chosen among

men enjoying the highest reputation for integrity. They were empowered to use credits opened to them by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Any appeal against their decisions had to be made to the King himself. The action of the Commissioners was very efficient, and reconstruction was considerably hastened when, in 1921, they were allowed to take a more active share in the work. While, in 1924, the State was only responsible for rebuilding 11,000 houses, 22,000 had been erected on the Commissioner's grant system, while 44,000 had been restored by the owners after receipt of war indemnities granted by special courts.<sup>1</sup>

The King and Queen also followed closely the restoration of public buildings of artistic or historic interest. Before the end of the War, the Government had already decided that this work would be undertaken by the State under the supervision of the *Commission des Monuments et des Sites*, a body of experts formed several years previously for the purpose of preserving the country's amenities. The results achieved at Nieuport, Furnes, Dixmude and Ypres show the care which was taken not only to give an exact reproduction of some ancient monuments, but even to improve upon the situation of pre-War days, by the addition of new public buildings which stand in perfect harmony with the old ones. In certain cases archaeological scruple was pushed so far that details of decoration which had disappeared or been replaced by new ones during the nineteenth century, have now been restored to their proper place. While modern reconstruction undertaken by the owners has frequently marred some picturesque features of the ruined towns, historical buildings have been treated with the utmost respect and may be considered as excellent copies of the destroyed originals.

(3) If the King witnessed with satisfaction the progress of reconstruction, he did not share the prevalent optimism concerning the financial situation.

<sup>1</sup> E. Mahain: *La Belgique restaurée*.

Before the Armistice, in October 1918, he had already been pressed to sign a decree acknowledging the "right to reparations" of all Belgian citizens whose property had suffered during the War. While unwilling to oppose this popular measure, he warned his ministers at the time of the danger for the State to assume full responsibility, and of relying too much on German reparations for repayment. He realized from the first that Germany would never be able to repair all the damage wrought during this long War, and that other countries, such as France, who had suffered heavy losses, would claim a large share of the indemnity. These forebodings were fully confirmed by events.

Belgium had obtained at Versailles her right of priority and the remission of her War debts to the Allies, but she had been refused redemption of the German paper marks in circulation in the country after the Armistice, which had been refunded to their owners at the pre-War rate of 1.25 francs. Besides the 7500 million francs paid on that account, the Government had been obliged to assume, since the Armistice, all expenses for the work of relief pursued by the *Comité d'Alimentation*; there were still 800,000 unemployed in the country at the end of 1918.

By 1924, the sums spent on War damages amounted to nearly 20,000 million francs, and the public debt, which was only 4250 million in 1914, had reached 45,000 million. In order to cope with these liabilities, the Government could only increase taxation and raise loans at home and abroad, in the hope that German reparation payments would gradually relieve the country of her disproportionate financial burden. With the progressive diminution of these payments, Belgian credit was seriously affected, and the franc was subjected to alarming fluctuations. An attempt made in 1925 to stabilize its value at 107 to the pound ended in disaster, and Parliament, threatened with a financial catastrophe, agreed in May 1926 to the creation of a Government of National Union for the purpose of restoring the financial situation.

While calling on M. Jaspar to take the Premiership, the King was also anxious to enlist the services of M. Francqui, whose ability and energy he had had many opportunities of appreciating. The latter had no wish to mix in politics, but the Sovereign was so insistent that he had no alternative but to accept. The situation was extremely critical, since Belgium was obliged to refund 8000 million francs within six months. M. Francqui promptly increased taxation from 600 to 2100 millions, but even this drastic measure did not steady the franc which, by July, sank to 217 to the pound. The Government had by now obtained full powers for a period of six months. The State Railways were converted into the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer*, and a royal decree compelled the bearers of Treasury bonds to exchange them against shares of the new Company. The constitution of a redemption fund of privileged shares to the value of 10,000 millions restored confidence, and allowed the Government, on October 26th, to stabilize the currency at 175 francs to the pound. The budget balance was favourable during the following years, and by 1929 the short term floating debt which had been the main cause of the trouble was nearly redeemed.<sup>1</sup>

In November 1926, M. Francqui returned to private life. While thanking him for the great service he had rendered the country, the King had the satisfaction of realizing that he had, once more, chosen the right man in a great emergency.

It may be wondered why the Sovereign did not intervene at an earlier date in order to prevent this financial crisis. So long as the full correspondence between the King and his ministers is not disclosed, it will be difficult to draw the line where his Government's activity ceased and his own influence began. Apart from the years of the War and in times of political crisis, he preferred to efface himself and act unobtrusively in private conversations or in his ministerial Council. But if there is a period during which he

<sup>1</sup> Van Kalken: *La Belgique Contemporaine*.

exerted his advisory power with more scrupulousness than in any other, it was during the first five years which succeeded the Armistice, when many of his subjects regretted that he did not tighten the reins of government and avoid the delays which a strict observance of parliamentary rules necessarily entailed.

He had excellent reasons to urge upon his people a temporary political truce and to enforce it, if need be, by assuming control of the work of material and financial reconstruction. He was better placed than anyone to oppose demands which were beyond the country's resources and to eliminate in good time German reparations from budgetary provisions. He restrained, nevertheless, from acting until formally asked to do so by Parliament, which gave him full powers to re-establish the country's credit. The unauthorized assumption of these powers would have created a dangerous precedent and undermined the prestige of parliamentary institutions. These were for Belgium, according to the King, the very basis of order and social discipline. Had he acted on his own initiative in 1919, or even 1921, as he was asked to do in 1926, economic advantages would have been outweighed by political disadvantages, and the Sovereign would not have been able to help his country through the crisis without even infringing the letter of his constitutional oath.

### (C) *Political Difficulties*

The sluggishness of moral progress is a constant source of disappointment to the social reformer and the patriot. King Albert had every reason to believe, in his hour of triumph, after his return to Brussels, that he would be able to keep the country together for many years to come, and that the work of reconstruction would not be hampered by party politics or linguistic divisions. The co-operation of Catholics and Liberals after the 1830 revolution had lasted over ten years. Would he be refused the advantages

which his grandfather had enjoyed? The staunch resistance of the Belgian people, during the German occupation, had been a far more severe test to their loyalty than the successful rebellion which had given Belgium her independence. It seemed unthinkable that the patriotic spirit which had asserted itself during the years of trial, should not be preserved after the hour of liberation.

The King's hopes were not entirely fulfilled, and he soon realized that many of his compatriots had not fully learned the lesson of the War. They had remained united as long as they were faced with a common enemy; they began to drift apart when hostile oppression was removed. The divisions were no longer the same, and the barriers which, in pre-War days, separated Catholics from Liberals, Socialists from non-Socialists, were not as strong as before, but new problems arose such as linguistic extremism and Communism, which had never assumed such importance. The introduction of general suffrage during the troubled days of economic restoration brought to the fore many grievances and difficulties which the wisest statesman could scarcely have foreseen.

(1) The revision of Article 47 of the Constitution, dealing with the franchise, ought strictly to have been made by a Chamber especially elected for this purpose according to the existing electoral law. In order to avoid delay, the revision was proposed to the Chamber by the Coalition Cabinet formed at Lophem and the new franchise was already applied to the elections which took place in November 1919, and which returned to the Chamber 75 Catholics, 70 Socialists and 34 Liberals. The Coalition Cabinet was maintained and most of the measures adopted during the two following years satisfied democratic claims.

The old quarrel on education was appeased by equal grants to State and Free Schools. Income-tax, supertax and death duties were introduced in October 1919. The next year, the Chamber passed a law on compulsory old

age insurance, and increased old age pensions. In 1921 the eight-hour day was adopted, following the recommendation of the League of Nations, and Article 310 of the Penal Code, which was looked upon as a restriction on the right to strike, was abolished.

On the whole, the Socialists had exerted a predominating influence on the Coalition. They had made considerable progress throughout the country, the number of trade union members rising from 120,000 in 1914 to 720,000 in 1920. Most of the reforms were justified, but placed additional burdens on the budget at a time when strict economy was essential. In spite of this success, some Labour leaders, in their anxiety not to lose touch with their left wing, made various declarations which compromised the *Union Sacrée*.

They started, in October 1921, a vigorous campaign in favour of the reduction of military service to six months. The cry of "War against War" was raised and the Minister of Public Works, M. Anseele, took part in a demonstration in which a banner was unfurled displaying a soldier breaking his gun. This incident caused violent indignation among the other members of the Cabinet and brought about the end of the "sacred union" which had been cemented with the blood of 46,000 Belgians. The era of political rivalries was re-opened and, three years after the Armistice, the King had again to contend with all the difficulties created by internal conflicts.

(2) The Sovereign's disappointment was increased by the fact that the creation of the Flemish University of Ghent which he had favoured as a measure of appeasement became, during the following years, a bone of contention between two important sections of the community.

The elections of November 1921 considerably increased the Catholic majority and the King, aware of the urgent necessity of reducing public expenses, chose as his new Prime Minister a man of action, outside politics, possessing special financial experience. M. Theunis took the port-

folio of Finance and formed a Catholic-Liberal Cabinet in the hope of extricating the country from the budgetary difficulties which were already threatening. He succeeded in effecting certain economies, but was insufficiently supported by Parliament, which spent many sittings discussing whether the new Flemish University should replace the old University, or whether the latter would become bilingual. This question, after provoking a Cabinet crisis in June 1923, was finally settled in the following month, according to a formula devised by Professor Nolf. The student who wished to be taught in French would be obliged to follow a certain number of courses in Flemish, the same system applying to the student who adopted Flemish as principal language.

Meanwhile Communism had again made its influence felt, during the month of June, in a strike launched by the union of railwaymen. It was not supported by the Socialists and was successfully brought to an end by the Government.

The Catholic-Liberal coalition, somewhat wrongly called the "bourgeois parties," was faced with the increased opposition not only of the Socialists, but also of the left-wing Catholics, including the representatives of the powerful League of Peasants, or *Boerenbond*, who favoured regional recruiting, the reduction of military service to six months, and more extensive social insurances. The discontent of the Flemish Catholics had been increased by the occupation of the Ruhr and by the extension of the time of service to twelve months. They joined the Socialists in an anti-French agitation and, in July 1924, rejected the project of a Franco-Belgian commercial treaty negotiated by the Theunis Cabinet. The latter, nevertheless, remained in power as the fluctuations of the franc prevented a change of financial policy. When the elections of April 1925 increased the Socialist strength in the Chamber by ten seats, the resignation of the Government could no longer be avoided, and the Socialist-Catholic alliance prepared during the last months brought into power M. Poullet, the

Catholic-Democratic leader, with M. Vandervelde at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This new political combination only lasted a few months. It has already been explained how the sudden collapse of the franc revived for a short time the "sacred union" of all parties and how a new cabinet, under M. Jaspar, succeeded in restoring the situation.<sup>1</sup> As early as October 1927, however, the Socialist ministers, who were still insistent on the question of the six months' military service, left the Government, but M. Jaspar, with the support of the Catholic Democrats, retained the Premiership and obtained, in 1928, the ratification of a new Franco-Belgian commercial treaty and the adoption of a military law fixing the time of service at eight months and introducing provincial recruiting.

The adoption of the new military law, which was completed in 1931 by the reorganization of Belgian defences, was largely due to King Albert's personal intervention. When, in 1927, the idea of introducing the six months' service was gaining ground in parliamentary circles, he suggested to his Prime Minister the appointment of a mixed Commission, on which military experts could be heard. This gave an opportunity to Lieut.-General Galet, the new Chief of Staff, to explain to the deputies the requirements of the army and to convince them that the short-term service would jeopardize the country's security.

Before leaving for the Congo in 1928, the King had taken all necessary measures to enlighten public opinion. On his return, he had the satisfaction of hearing that the Commission's report had been adopted by Parliament. Events have shown that the Sovereign acted wisely when he insisted on establishing the country's military status on a sound basis, as long as the Great Powers' plan for Disarmament had not materialized.

(3) From that year on, the political position remained

<sup>1</sup> See p. 365.

stabilized, and the Catholic-Liberal Coalition was left in power with the Socialists in opposition.

Scarcely had Belgium emerged from the grave financial crisis of 1926, than she began to feel the effect of the economic depression which affected the whole world. Her export trade and industrial activity suffered grievously, and the relief of increasing unemployment threw new burdens on the budget. The King realized that, under the circumstances, the country needed a stable government. He had hitherto carefully abstained from active intervention in political matters, and only exerted his influence to warn his ministers against excessive expenditure and military reforms which would have dangerously weakened Belgian defensive forces. During the last years of his reign, he was determined not to allow political intrigues to compromise the safety of the State. As trustee of the whole country, he considered that he had the right to prevent changes in the Government which were not justified by the state of public opinion.

In 1930 he refused M. Jaspar's resignation, which had been prompted by the attitude of certain political organizations. In a public letter to his Prime Minister, he explained that the question which had provoked a ministerial crisis had not even been debated in Parliament: "In accepting purely and simply the Cabinet's resignation," he added, "I should establish the most dangerous precedent in the normal working of the political institutions which, for a century, have secured the country's existence."

Again, in 1933, after M. Jaspar had been replaced by M. de Broqueville, at a time when the economic crisis was particularly acute, the King maintained his minister in power, on the ground that the cause of his defeat in Parliament—a surprise vote taken on the nomination of the burgomaster of a small Commune—was not sufficient to warrant a change of leadership. He insisted that the Cabinet should not fall on a petty quarrel when it had such an important mission to fulfil. Writing from Laeken on February 15th, he emphasized this point: "The country

would not understand that the fate of a Government which has undertaken to restore the nation's financial and economic situation could depend on the validity of a village election. I cannot, under the circumstances, accept the resignation of the ministry over which you preside, and I ask you and your colleagues to continue without interruption the arduous work which you have undertaken."

A few months only before his death, he prevented another political crisis by solving a problem which seriously disturbed public opinion. Strong measures had been taken in 1919 against civil servants accused of having failed in their duties during the German occupation. On the ground that some of these measures had been taken hastily, and under pressure of certain of its supporters, the Government had expressed the intention of reinstating the penalized officials. This had provoked a strong protest from the ex-service men and other patriotic associations. The King sent Comte de Broqueville a letter accompanied by a note in which he explained why he considered that a fresh inquiry should be instituted by competent judges before any reinstatement could be made.

(4) In all these cases, the Sovereign's advice was accepted without a word of protest by ministers, deputies and public opinion. By using his power with great reluctance, and only when the country's general interests were concerned, King Albert had obtained an influence which was scarcely in accordance with political tradition. Where was the time when Leopold II, writing to a friend, complained that it was enough for him to express an opinion for his people to oppose it? Through a strange paradox, the Monarch who had sought power had lost it, while his successor, who constantly avoided urging his views, was freely given the country's confidence. Both worked hard and unceasingly for Belgium, but their methods differed. King Albert did not only respect the Constitution, he supported it in the spirit and in the letter, and by supporting it became the

symbol of the whole nation, above and outside class and parties, the mouthpiece of the common people who do not care for the intrigues of political caucuses, but only wish to live in peace and security.

The King's belief in parliamentary institutions did not blind him to their defects. He wished to protect his people against the ambitions of private or group interests, whether in finance or politics, just as he wished to protect them against foreign imperialism. His sympathy was with the masses so easily exploited even by those who profess to defend them. From the high position he occupied, he could survey the social field as distinctly as the valleys stretching around the summits which he loved to climb. Without prejudice, he enlisted the support of the best men and resisted the influence of the worst.

His last words to his Minister of Justice, M. Janson, were a warning against dishonest financiers. Alluding to certain foreign scandals, he said: "And above all, my dear minister, protect the owners of small savings—*veillez à la protection de la petite épargne.*"<sup>1</sup>

M. Maurras, whose monarchist opinions are well known and who has a few disciples in Belgium, reminded his readers recently of a conversation he had with King Albert: "People told you, perhaps," said the Sovereign, "that I was a Bolshevik King?" As the French writer protested, he went on: "Yes, yes, M. Maurras, you must have been told that I was a King of the Left. I am not a Bolshevik, and I do not belong to the Left. But, believe me," and here he emphasized every syllable, "I wish to defend my Belgian workmen against international finance."<sup>2</sup>

(5) On the whole, King Albert suffered during these years some bitter disappointments. He had hoped to see his country greater and happier than before the ordeal of the War. The brief spell of prosperity which she

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Leclercq: *Albert, Roi des Belges.*

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Daye: *Vie et Mort d'Albert Ier*, p. 80.

enjoyed after the first obstacles of reconstruction had been overcome, was followed by a period of uncertainty, due to financial embarrassment and, later, by the creeping paralysis of world depression. The Sovereign had at least the satisfaction of knowing that, owing to sweeping social reforms adopted after the Armistice, the poor had suffered comparatively less than others from the higher cost of living, and that provisions had been made against unemployment. But the impoverishment of the professional and intellectual classes, and the rapid rise of a number of uneducated well-to-do people, had seriously upset, in Belgium as in other countries, the sense of social responsibility.

Greatness, for the King, depended far more on moral standards than on economic or political progress, and the country suffered, in that respect, from the reaction which followed the War. Her dreams had not come true, and although the people's discontent did not seriously affect their energy and activity, it found ready channels in political and linguistic differences. That social order which was based "on the common harmony of hearts and wills," that sense of civic duty which was identified with "the spirit of fraternity," above all, that unity which should have been "consolidated by common sufferings and endurance" were not maintained, as he certainly trusted they would be in his great speech of November 1918. There is always an element of danger in systematic opposition to authority, even when that authority is enforced by an enemy, and a certain number of Belgians had some difficulty in forgetting that what might have been a virtue before the Armistice, became a fault after that day.

For the first time since 1840, the Belgian State was opposed from within by disintegrating forces. Bolshevism or Communism did not play an important part in Belgian post-War politics; with the exception of one or two outbursts, its activities were restrained by a powerful and well-organized Socialist Party, which took a share in the Government and realized the most popular reforms in its

programme. More disturbing was the attitude of a small group of Flemish extremists who, after the defeat of the Activists following the Armistice, inherited their grievances and pursued similar aims.

The origin of the movement is not easy to trace. In 1917, after the failure of the British offensive in Flanders, which the Belgian Army was to join in a general advance, the unrest which affected at the time other sectors of the Western Front extended to the Yser. The King had successfully restored the morale of his troops by dealing with insubordination, while reproving the tactless attitude of certain officers which had provoked it. The trouble arose mainly from war weariness, but was embittered by the difference of language between Flemish-speaking privates and some of their French-speaking leaders. It was further fostered by the invidious methods of German propaganda. The Germans had no difficulty in obtaining photographs of the relatives of a number of Belgian soldiers. Informed by their Intelligence Service of the approximate position which these men's units occupied on the front, they sent their airmen over the line, with orders to drop the pictures, accompanied by incitements to desertion, in the neighbourhood. These appeals produced little result, but undermined the resolution and loyalty of the weak.

Nothing is more characteristic of King Albert than the way he reacted to popular opposition. While maintaining order and discipline, he wished to examine immediately whether it was derived from genuine grievances which should be removed. Far from dismissing symptoms of disaffection which might have appeared of trivial importance considering the small number concerned, he agreed with M. de Broqueville that a special Commission, meeting at Havre, should inquire into the Flemish problem as a whole and draw up a list of reforms. These included the immediate and complete "*flammandisation*" of the University of Ghent, further linguistic changes in Belgian administration and judicial procedure, and even regional recruiting;

in fact, all the reforms which have since been adopted. The Sovereign was so keenly interested in this question that, in April 1918, when the German offensive was in full swing and the Yser position threatened by the enemy's progress, he wished to receive a detailed report on the Commission's conclusions, which was brought to *Les Moëres* by M. Van der Essen, the Prime Minister's *Chef de Cabinet*.<sup>1</sup>

Had it been possible to act on the Commission's recommendations on the morrow of the Armistice, the country would have been spared ten years of painful discussions, and Separatism would never have exerted any serious influence.

The extremists gathered force from the delays caused by Parliament. By calling their party the "Front Party," they posed as discontented ex-soldiers, but a large number of them had spent the war years in Holland where they had tried to stir up disloyalty among the refugees. The movement was strengthened by the old Activists, who considered their leaders as the "victims of persecution." It was favoured by the minor clergy of certain Flemish districts who rallied their followers with the cry of "*alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Christus*," and proclaimed the racial creed that to act for Flanders was to act for God. Its tendencies were neither pro-German nor pro-Dutch, but were opposed to the Belgian State, which, according to the formula favoured by the Germans during the War, was once more denounced as the "artificial creation of diplomacy" and the "oppressor of the Flemish people." "Frontism" became an exasperated form of regionalism and could, from this point of view, be connected with similar movements all over Europe. "I first belong to my village," wrote one of its leaders, "I belong to my small country (Flanders)." <sup>2</sup>

The King was not opposed to regionalism. He knew that a love of the Clock Tower was an essential characteristic of Belgian life and that a healthy local feeling was a source of strength, not of weakness. From the day of his Accession

<sup>1</sup> Van der Essen in *L'Avant-garde*, April 25th, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> E. van Dieren in *Le Flambeau*, August, September 1929.

to the throne, he had reacted against the prejudice prevailing in the Belgian upper classes against Flemish culture and literature. He had been the first Belgian King to take the oath in both languages, and had made it a rule always to address Flemish audiences in their own tongue. He pushed his respect for local tradition so far that, on certain occasions, he allowed the display of the Flemish flag, which was considered by many as seditious, and always rose when the band played the Flemish hymn, *The Lion of Flanders*. But his sympathy for regionalism could not allow him to accept disruptive claims which aimed at separating the Flemish and Walloon districts of Belgium, economically interdependent, and closely linked together during the course of Belgian history in one political unit.

One of the first functions attended by Prince Albert, as heir to the throne, was a sitting of the Flemish Academy. Congratulating the writers who surrounded him on the efforts they had made to revive Flemish literature, he had spoken of the respect due to the language of "our Flemish race." Thirty-four years later, in July 1930, addressing the ex-service men, he justified the people's attachment to their mother-tongue. "It awakens in us," he said, "the distant echoes of the past, and it preserves our deepest and most personal characteristics. Our national unity, which is, from every point of view the guarantee of our national prosperity, is in no manner threatened by the duality of our national languages. On the contrary, it is strengthened by mutual exchanges, and by the wealth derived from two independent cultures." The same year, at the inauguration of the first section of the Albert Canal, which will form another link between the industrial region of Liège and the great port of Antwerp, he asserted that the new waterway would be "the symbol of the economic unity of the Belgian provinces." Again at Ghent, he alluded to the part played in Belgian history by Jacques Van Artevelde: "He was the first who distinguished clearly the economic solidarity between the States of Lothier and Flanders, that

is to say, of our own provinces. He was misunderstood in his time and repaid with ingratitude, but history has vindicated his views.” And he added: “Those who are misled by maintaining that Belgium has only an artificial existence show themselves unworthy of this illustrious Fleming.”

These warnings came after a period of heated controversy. In 1925 the Separatists had only six deputies, out of 186, in the Chamber. Their influence would have been negligible if the exasperated patriotism of their opponents had not led them to denounce the Flemish movement as a whole. These attacks provoked some discontent in Flanders, and a campaign was launched at the time for the amnesty of the Activists condemned in 1918. Their leader, Borms, the ex-President of the “Council of Flanders,” who had been reprieved by the King and was expecting his release in a few weeks, was proposed as a candidate in Antwerp and elected in December 1928. At the next general election of June 1929, eleven “frontists” were returned to the Chamber.

The Belgians, who were preparing to celebrate the centenary of their national independence, were aghast to witness the progress of a movement which appropriated the worst principles of German propaganda and aimed at nothing less than the break-up of their national unity. It was particularly galling to them to notice that a campaign which had so utterly failed, when subsidised by German money and protected by the German soldiery, met with some support only ten years after the country’s liberation.<sup>1</sup> A number of proposals were put forward by those who wished either to “crush Separatism” or to make exaggerated concessions, in the forlorn hope that the extremists would be gradually converted to more moderate views.

In the midst of this turmoil, the King never uttered a bitter word against those whom he had every reason to consider as his worst enemies. In spite of taunts and personal attacks, he remained faithful to his belief in the

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 257–260.

free play of parliamentary institutions and in the principle of order "based on the harmony of hearts and wills," but he never lost an opportunity of pointing out that unity was the essential condition of Belgian independence and of the preservation of this very regionalism which his adversaries exalted so highly. It was the main theme of the series of speeches which he delivered in the principal cities of the country on the occasion of the Belgian Centenary. With untiring patience he insisted on the distinction to be made between a fruitful regionalism which should play an important part in the development of the State, and a destructive particularism which was nothing but "a kind of narrow collective egoism, only furthering local interests at the expense of general interests." On June 1st 1930, at Mons, he remarked: "The very name of Belgium is much older than that of all our present provinces and of most of our cities. Those who, in spite of all evidence, would question this fact . . . would prove their ignorance of history and historical geography." Everywhere, in Flanders and in Wallonia, speaking in French and Flemish, he preached the gospel of union, this union which was, as he said in Liège, "the very condition of our autonomous existence, of all our powers—State, provinces, communes—deliberating without constraint, asserting a free and conscious will."

The result was unexpected. All parties made a great effort towards conciliation and decided to solve the linguistic problem within the frame of national institutions. Further concessions were made to Flemish demands in the country's administration, a new law extended the linguistic régime, already applied in penal procedure, to civil and commercial procedure, and the complete transformation of the University of Ghent was adopted by a large majority, in February 1930.

In all important departments of social life Flemish was placed on the same footing as French.

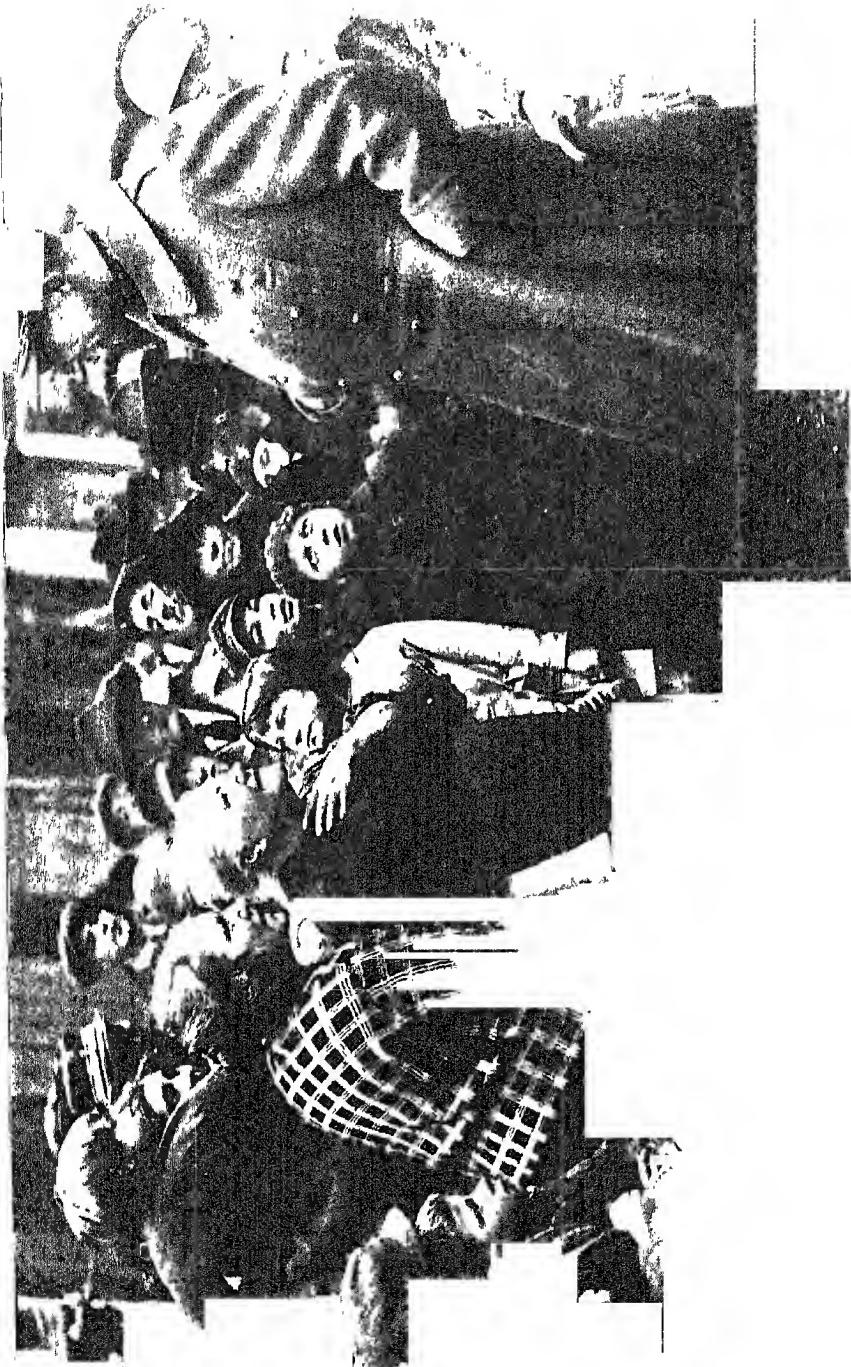
- (6) The King lived long enough to witness this healthy

reaction, but he seems, nevertheless, to have shown certain signs of weariness. It was not so much that he was disillusioned by his people—he loved them too much ever to admit it—but the work of reconstruction had not been carried out in favourable circumstances, and had been unduly prolonged. To the strain of the great tragedy had been added the almost inextricable difficulties of its conclusion: reparations, debts, unrest, economic depression. The shadow of the War extended as far as the Centenary celebrations and cast its gloom on the great festival.

The future did not only depend on the Belgians and their Government, but on the trend of world events, and in many directions the principles of international law and constitutionalism to which the Sovereign had dedicated himself and his country were at a discount. If constitutionalism were to be weakened, what of the monarchy? And if international law lost its power, what of Belgium herself? Small nations could only survive in a civilized and orderly world. In several quarters, the rule of force which had suffered such an overwhelming defeat in 1918, seemed to have been given a new life. The League of Nations was no longer what it had been, and the spirit of Locarno had lost part of its glamour. They were the sole guarantees of his country's security. Would they fail her, as neutrality had failed, and, if they failed, what again of Belgium?

He succeeded in hiding these feelings behind a mask of benevolent irony. While deplored the general tendency towards republicanism, he could not help smiling when he met in courtly functions a large number of ex-monarchs. On his return from Rome, after the marriage of his daughter, Princess Marie-José, to the Prince of Piedmont, he remarked: "It was really a very fine ceremony. Just imagine, I saw there the ex-King Manoel of Portugal, the ex-King George of Greece, and even the ex-King Amanullah of Afghanistan, for, as you know, there are many unemployed in our trade—*il y a beaucoup de chômeurs dans notre métier.*"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Daye: *Vie et Mort d'Albert Ier*, p. 54.



12 King Albert in Namur among the victims of the Mensch  
Hoods 1926  
(Photo *Van Parc*)

He had always maintained that it was possible and even necessary to reconcile monarchical principles with democratic institutions. He had succeeded in doing it, but many seemed to have failed. Besides, and it was perhaps his only serious fault, he often doubted his own power. His anxiety not to be deluded by flattering appearances inclined him to pessimism, whenever his own prestige was concerned. "In a crowd," writes Comte de Lichtervelde, "he saw at once the ten fellows who did not take off their hats. He knew that his attitude in public lacked ease and naturalness; he scarcely believed in the charm of kingship."<sup>1</sup> Almost all those who knew him well and who witnessed the overwhelming manifestation of popular grief which followed his death expressed the same regret: "If he had only known!"

Not that he ever complained before them, but his stoicism was far too sincere to allow him completely to hide his true feelings. He had mapped out for himself an ideal, and he had made it his duty to strive for it. The dream was almost realized in 1918, but this realization did not last long. Life was still full of interest, and it was well worth while pursuing his efforts, but they had not brought him what he expected, when he dreamt of the future before the last offensive, and when he and his Queen made their joyous entries into the good cities of Bruges, Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp and Liège. His people had recovered their independence, but had not yet regained that peaceful contentment which they enjoyed in former days. Those whose condition had improved were still fretting for more, in a sick world suffering from want amidst plenty. It was not even easy for him to comfort them, except when a public calamity, such as the floods of the Meuse, or some mining accident, made him cancel all engagements and rush to the scene of disaster. He could not come into such close contact with his subjects as he had done with his soldiers on the Yser. Ceremony, which he disliked so much but which he considered it his duty to

<sup>1</sup> *Revue Générale*, March 1934.

obey, held him again in its clutches and compelled him to act and to speak, not against his wishes, but with a formality which was foreign to his nature.

He was entirely devoid of histrionic faculties and was far too conscious of it. He wrote excellent speeches and conscientiously learnt them by heart. If he had delivered them freely, their effect would have been greatly increased, but at the last moment the paper came out of his pocket and he read, instead of speaking. "Let us be short," he used to say, "for the sake of those who are going to listen to us." "I have always been able," he once remarked, "to express my thoughts in less than fifteen minutes, but it is perhaps because I am no orator."<sup>1</sup> This was not a witticism. That quaint shyness which had proved so painful in his young days, and which he had mastered to a great extent after his marriage, had not entirely left him. He never realized how it endeared him to his people and how touched they were to see that their hero retained his youthful modesty unchanged after his trial and victory, unaltered by suffering and adulation.

There is a picture of him, wandering through his palace on the morrow of his return to Brussels, rather disconsolate, dressed in the shabby uniform which he used to wear at La Panne. He had some difficulty in resuming the old life and in finding his way in these large rooms. Everything seemed so strange, and some familiar faces of the household had disappeared. Did he ever regret his villa behind the Yser? If he did, it was only because he could lead there the simple life which he preferred, and talk when he liked and as he liked to simple people, his own soldiers, whose dangers he shared.

(7) King Albert was an indefatigable traveller and found some relaxation, whenever the political situation allowed it, in resuming the rounds of visits and journeys, which he had begun in pre-War days. To further the good relations

<sup>1</sup> Leclercq, *op. cit.*

between Belgium and friendly countries, to thank the Allies for their co-operation during the War, to discover if possible new fields in which Belgian economic activity could exercise itself, was for him a welcome task. He wished also to explore once again the Colony where such important changes had occurred in recent years, following the further discovery and exploitation of its mineral wealth.

Scarcely one year passed which did not bring with it some fresh opportunity. Always accompanied by the Queen, who continued to share his hopes, troubles and interests, he paid official visits to Paris, in December 1918, to the United States in the autumn of the following year, to Brazil in 1920, to Madrid and London in 1921, and to Rome in 1922. Three years later, the Sovereigns celebrated their Silver Wedding by making an extensive journey through India. In 1928, they sailed together for the Congo, and later were received at Copenhagen; in 1933 they went on a pilgrimage to Palestine.

It has been said that nothing is as like one official journey as another, and a detailed account of these various visits would make tedious reading. The Sovereigns' popularity was universal, and the King was greeted wherever he went not only as the representative of his people, but as the hero who had haunted the imagination of foreign nations since the epic days of August 1914. His first care was to express his personal gratitude to those who had proved his country's friends during her years of trial, who had taken some share in the work of relief and helped Belgian wounded and refugees. That was, for him, a debt of honour which could never be repaid and which he wished to recognize as far as lay in his power.

Once this duty fulfilled, the traveller's instinct reasserted itself. In mind, as well as in appearance, he had remained extraordinarily youthful. His untiring curiosity could never be satisfied. In spite of disappointments, the world was still a wonderful place to live in, and he delighted in the change of scenery, the discovery of historic monu-

ments and works of art, of great ports and industrial cities, in the manners of the people themselves, their customs, habits, national characteristics. "Man is the same everywhere," he once remarked, "but he expresses himself differently. That is why travelling is so interesting." This Sovereign of a small country was not only a good European, but a true citizen of the world, with a mind open to a better understanding of all races and creeds, an informed wanderer always thirsty for more information, whether he journeyed among the canyons of Colorado, through the Indian jungle or the busy streets of London or Paris.

Between two receptions, he found some time to pursue his investigations incognito. Even during the few days spent in London in 1921, every one of which was filled with engagements, he managed to revisit the British Museum. Following his early habits, he called there before 10 A.M. and was duly refused admittance. Without revealing his identity, he apologized and took a turn in the street, waiting for the time of opening. Meanwhile, an officer of Scotland Yard informed the doorkeeper that he had closed his gate against the King of the Belgians. When the latter returned, he waved aside apologies and took the incident as a matter of course. It was by no means the first time that his incognito had caused him some inconvenience, neither was it the last. When in Stockholm, on the occasion of the marriage of his son, he felt amused and gratified at being refused admission to the royal palace where he was staying, on his return from one of his usual morning rambles through the town. He liked people to do their duty.

When sailing for America, the King hoped to meet again President Wilson, whom he had received in Brussels a few months before, but on the very day when he left Antwerp, the President fell seriously ill and was consequently unable to take part in any of the receptions prepared for the Belgian Sovereigns. King Albert nevertheless insisted on calling on him and was painfully impressed by his short visit. Among the exuberant demonstrations which greeted him, he must

have meditated on the downfall of the Statesman who had enjoyed such unprecedented prestige at Versailles. What would the non-ratification of the Peace Treaty by America mean for Europe, and more particularly for Belgium? The projected alliance with France and England was now in jeopardy, and the League of Nations itself seriously weakened.

In the absence of the President, the King was received by Vice-President Marshall, who greeted him as the man whose action "had helped to re-establish the world under the Rule of Law and the spirit of concord and freedom." "Since the days of Christopher Columbus" no visit had been more memorable. The reception of New York City was in the same key. As the enthusiasm grew more and more uproarious, the King's embarrassment increased, and when the Mayor asked him to stand up, according to the custom, in acknowledgment of the cheers, he could but remark, smiling: "I am already so tall. Do you think that all this is for me only? They also like their Mayor."<sup>1</sup>

Then followed a triumphal progress through the States. At Toledo, the Sovereigns were received by Mr. Brand Whitlock who, as American Minister in Brussels, had proved a staunch friend during the first years of the occupation. The King wished particularly to visit the tomb of Lincoln, and the homage he paid on that occasion to the memory of the great President is significant. Among the virtues which, according to him, distinguished Lincoln's character were: "Honesty and righteousness, absolute confidence in the future of the nation, indomitable courage when confronted with enmity, firmness and clear-sightedness." The American press did not fail to apply to the King himself the qualities which he praised in the Great President, and, allowing for the difference of time and circumstances, the comparison is not without foundation.

If some ceremonies which took place during his American journey put his modesty to a severe test, he frankly enjoyed the spontaneous familiarity with which small wor-

<sup>1</sup> P. Goemaere: *Albert Ier loin des Foules*.

shippers besieged him with requests. M. Franz Ansel, who accompanied the Sovereigns, tells us how, in the Far West, the King frequently "obliged" young photographers and even obeyed their instructions as to the attitude he should take. Their genuine ignorance of etiquette must have proved most refreshing.

The journey to Rome, in 1922, was not without some political influence. The Belgian Sovereigns, wished of course, to visit the Pope and the King of Italy on the same occasion. Since 1870, however, the tradition had been established that no Catholic Monarch could be received at the Vatican if he went to the Quirinal. Benedict XV agreed to waive this rule in favour of the Belgian Sovereigns, but he made it a condition that no mention should be made in official speeches of "the Third Rome," "Rome Capital," "Rome Intangible," such expressions being considered as offensive to the Head of the Church. King Albert undertook to submit this request to the King of Italy and, since it was complied with, he may be considered as having contributed some small share in the *rapprochement* which followed between Signor Mussolini and the Vatican.

The Sovereigns went to the Congo, in 1928, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Bas-Congo-Katanga Railway, linking together the mining districts of Katanga with the waterway of the Kasai at Port Francqui. The Colony had lately enjoyed a period of remarkable prosperity, and the King was anxious to compare the present situation with that of 1909. There were, besides, certain questions, such as sleeping sickness, native labour, and the creation of natural reserves which he wished to study *de visu*.

He began his tour by unveiling a statue of Leopold II erected in Léopoldville: "As time passes," he declared on this occasion, "as temporary controversies fade in the distance, and as the great work which he conceived, willed and realized grows in scope and prosperity, the genius of his powerful personality asserts itself more and more, and his figure dominates a whole period of our history."

By the Kasai and the new railway, the Sovereigns reached Elisabethville where the King outlined a vast programme of public works. Congratulating the directors of the Katanga Company on the attention they gave to the welfare of their employees, he emphasized the solidarity existing between Blacks and Whites: "Nothing great and lasting can be achieved," he declared, "without reconciling the interests of the two races who are engaged in fruitful collaboration."

During the return journey, the Sovereigns took special interest in the work undertaken by the missions, and in public health. On arriving in Antwerp, the King gave an account of the favourable impressions he had gathered in Africa and again returned to his favourite theme: "Let us never forget," he said, "that to work for the welfare of the native population is to work for the prosperity of the Colony. All colonizing nations incur imprescriptible duties towards the people on the territory of which they settle: individual security, public tranquillity, safeguard of liberty, inviolability of property and of the labour contract. Among all these duties is there one more important than the preservation of public health? Here, again, much remains to be done, although remarkable results have already been achieved, and nothing should stop us in the fight we are waging against illness which affects alike Whites and Blacks. *Primum vivere.*"

These words were followed by prompt action. The *Fonds Reine Elisabeth d'Assistance Médicale aux Indigènes*, founded in 1930, devoted its resources to research work in connection with sleeping sickness and other diseases affecting the Congo natives. The *Institut de Médecine Tropicale Prince Léopold* was established in Antwerp in the same year.

In the course of his journey, the King had met a few compatriots who had dwelt on the solitary life which they were leading, cut off from all civilization: "You should have seen the Katanga," he remarked, "as I saw it in 1909."—"Ah, Sire," answered one of the colonists, "a

king has travelling facilities which are beyond the reach of common mortals."—"Surely," he replied, "I travelled through Katanga on foot."

The transformation of the Colony, during the intervening twenty years, could scarcely be realized. Railways had been extended, motor roads built in the most remote districts; the Congo could be crossed in several directions with the utmost comfort. From being a source of expense, the Colony had become, in the after-War period, an important asset; but the main problems which preoccupied the young Prince still troubled the mature King. Prosperity was not enough; the moral responsibility towards the natives must be faced in all its implications. Although their rights may be respected and their wages adequate, special care must be taken that they should not suffer from the contact of civilization, either through sickness or demoralization.

This question of the duty of the stronger towards the weaker race dominated King Albert's colonial outlook from the beginning to the end of his reign. On the occasion of the Colonial Festival organized in Antwerp in 1930, he rendered homage to the pioneers of colonization and to the Belgian doctors, magistrates, engineers and missionaries who had followed in their wake. "Belgian colonization," he concluded, "is a work of high civilization and progress . . . of which our people have a right to be proud. May they never forget that it is to their lasting interest that the Colony, with its native population, should benefit in a large proportion from the multiple advantages which Europe seeks in these distant lands."

King Albert's colonial policy affords an excellent example of the continuity which characterizes his activity in every department of life and which even the catastrophe of the World War did not succeed in breaking. In colonial matters, as in linguistic and social questions, he merely picked up, in 1918, the threads which had been severed four years before.

On January 1st 1914, the Sovereign had outlined before

the deputies of the Chamber a vast plan of financial, judicial and administrative reforms affecting the Congo. This plan included an extension of the railways, the grant of a loan to the Colony by the Mother-Country, measures of de-centralization and a stricter control over the judicial power. It was discussed by Parliament during the following months, but it was not before 1921 that it was finally adopted. The financial intervention of Belgium was carried into effect at one of the last ministerial Councils over which King Albert presided.

Just as honesty was the best policy in international affairs, the protection of public health and natural resources proved in the end the soundest method of colonial administration: "The question is not," declared the King, "whether Belgium derives money from the Congo, but whether African resources can be used in Africa. If I sold to-morrow all the trees of my park at Laeken, I should no doubt receive a few millions, but I should have ruined my property. It is the Congo Fund — *le fonds congolais*—which must be developed. A rash and greedy exploitation would ruin it instead of increasing it."<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of the 1928 journey, an incident occurred which showed perhaps better than anything else how deeply King Albert valued his Colony and identified it with Belgium. It is all the more significant that, by acting as he did, he was deliberately taking serious risks not only for himself, but also for the Queen, who accompanied him. A telegram reached the Ministry of Colonies announcing that yellow fever had broken out at Matadi and Boma and suggesting that the Sovereigns' departure should be postponed. The Minister went at once to Laeken, where he found the King and Queen on the point of leaving for Antwerp. King Albert asked calmly whether any Whites had already died, and was told that such was the case and that the present uneasiness in the Congo might degenerate into panic and jeopardize the success of the journey. After

<sup>1</sup> R. P. Charles in *Revue de l'Ancan*, March 1934.

a moment's thought, he answered: "It is a Sovereign's business to be where his people suffer. My presence will bring them comfort. I am going and the Queen goes with me. Do not publish the news until to-night, in order not to sadden our people to-day."

That same evening a short communiqué appeared in the Press which passed almost unnoticed. Happily the epidemic did not spread.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leclercq, *op. cit.*

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Man and the King

#### (A) *Humanism*

IT may seem strange to speak of Humanism in connection with King Albert's attitude of mind. He lived in a world very remote from the atmosphere of the Renaissance. He was not particularly interested in the classics, and it is doubtful whether he ever read the works of modern American philosophers, such as Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. There is, nevertheless, no other word to characterize his keen interest for "all things human," his insistence on "moral values," and the perfect balance which he succeeded in preserving between will power, knowledge, and physical training. In every department of his activity, there probably lived in his time men of more outstanding merit. He might have met, and he no doubt met, greater statesmen, generals, engineers, students of social and scientific questions, more discriminating art-lovers and better trained sportsmen, but he possessed to the highest degree this quality of "all roundness" which allowed him to express sound views on almost any subject, and to make some personal contributions to those with which he was more closely acquainted. In a world of specialists, he excelled not only through the vast store of information which he had accumulated, but through his ability in discerning in it some guiding principles which inspired his own conduct.

(1) For men of his generation, the development of engineering and applied sciences and the study of social problems occupied almost the same position as classical art and literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In a similar way, exploration of the most remote regions of the globe replaced the discoveries of the Indies. The world had grown larger in more than one sense. The principles of the French Revolution which inspired the "philosophers" of the eighteenth century were being converted into concrete political and economic realities. Democracy had come to stay. Objective science, on the other hand, which had remained for so long in the background, was altering human life and human outlook through a number of new inventions and discoveries. The beginnings of this movement which coincided with the foundation of the modern Belgian State, were nothing compared with the rapid progress realized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Science now stood to the fore, transforming industry and revolutionizing social and international relations. The more or less self-contained life of the nineteenth-century Belgian State was no longer possible. A new era was opening which would bring about chaos or salvation. Finance, political economy, morality itself were thrown into the melting pot. The Great War appeared only as the birth pang of this new world.

Lost in this turmoil, most political and intellectual leaders of the time either took refuge in their studies and developed their own branch of learning, or allowed themselves to drift with the tide while trying to steer their boat into calmer waters. Statesmanship was everywhere replaced by some form of opportunism, and moral principles sacrificed to "practical politics."

The more we pursue our inquiries into King Albert's interests and conduct, the more we realize that he belongs to the small band of modern men who succeeded in reconciling the traditions of the past with the urgent necessities of the present. None of his contemporaries could have been called more progressive; none was more interested in new inventions, discoveries and social reforms; none worked harder for the establishment of international relations based, not on Force or Power, but on Order and Law. At the same

time, he never ignored the teaching of history or minimized the importance of tradition. The dazzling changes which he witnessed did not blind him to the continuity of human efforts and aspirations. In one sense everything was, and should be, different; in another, human nature remained the same and, above all, the moral principles which had hitherto guided all Christian societies in their painful and halting evolution were, and should be, preserved. Nothing lasting and fruitful could be achieved without them. The ultimate aim of all material, scientific and social progress is the enlightenment and improvement of the individual, national and international soul. Moral values supersede material and intellectual values in every branch of human activity. Just as the mind should be strengthened through the fitness of the body, public spirit should be sustained by economic and social organization.

This belief was the cardinal principle which inspired every word and every action of King Albert in his private and public life and which places him in the foremost rank of modern Humanism.

(2) *Mens sana in corpore sano.* The King had inherited the physical characteristics of the Coburg family. Like his father, his uncle and his grandfather, he was a tall and powerful man. But while his ancestors led a more or less sedentary life, the constant practice of sport had given him the aspect of a trained athlete. There was no exercise in which he did not take a boyish delight, cycling, skating, motor driving, flying, and, above all, mountaineering. He lacked time for tennis and golf and had a natural distaste for shooting and hunting. He did not like to kill animals, nor did he like to see them killed. Playing football presented obvious difficulties—besides, it had not yet become popular on the Continent in his youth—but he encouraged it among his soldiers during the Yser days and presided over all their important matches. On the very day of his death, he was expected in Brussels at the *Palais des Sports*, to witness a

cycle race, when he hoped to congratulate the young Belgian champion, Jef Scherens, on another victory. He took a special pleasure in watching old popular games, such as that of *balle au tamis* or archery, and on several occasions tried his hand at bending the bow.

He was not only a keen lover of sport but, in several instances, a pioneer. In pre-War days, he tried every new model of motor car which came into the country and kept quite a collection of them in his garage. As early as 1907, when heir to the throne, accompanied by a friend, he made an ascent in a free balloon to the great annoyance of King Leopold, and, two years later, he repeated this experience in one of the earliest types of dirigible, the *Zodiac* of Comte de La Vaulx. His first flight in an aeroplane took place during the War, in April 1917, in an old Farman. Soon the King, often accompanied by the Queen, adopted flying as a customary mode of travelling. He crossed the Channel more than ten times, and, on all long journeys, liked to act as navigator. In later years he flew in Northern Africa and crossed the Mediterranean from Casablanca to Toulouse. He travelled, in the same way, from Cairo to Bagdad and performed a remarkable feat of endurance for a man of his years, when, in 1932, he flew to the Congo in an air liner of Imperial Airways, via Alexandria, Khartoum and Juba. He finished the journey in a hydroplane and, after visiting the National Park which he had lately created, returned by the same route, to land finally in Athens where the Queen was waiting for him, covering nearly 7000 miles in thirteen days. "I use an aeroplane," he said, "to accustom the Belgians to this new mode of transport, like my great-grandfather Louis Philippe took the train to reassure his Parisians."

The beginning of his alpine experiences has already been mentioned.<sup>1</sup> These were considered by the King as his real holidays, in which he could entirely forget affairs of State, mix with other sportsmen under the shelter of incognito, and drop the heavy cloak of ceremony. No

<sup>1</sup> See p. 67.

year passed, after the War, without some excursion to Switzerland, Tyrol or Trentino, first with experienced guides, and later with fellow climbers. One of them, M. Michel, told how the Sovereign, meeting him in Switzerland, asked to accompany his party: "I am told that you are a great alpinist. I am simply a tourist." One of their last ascents was the Jungfrau: "While climbing, we discussed botany. After stopping at the Rothal hut, we started again before daybreak. When we reached the glacier, we roped ourselves together and the King kept pace with us, overcoming all difficulties and showing great strength and agility. . . . After a seven hours' climb, we reached the shelter at the summit of the Jungfrau. The weather was wonderful. Albert I did not talk much; he was no doubt tired, as we were, but he looked particularly happy. . . . The same evening, he drove his car to Haslihorn, near Lucerne, where his family were spending their holidays."

The King enjoyed every minute of these trips, which were too often curtailed by some news from Brussels, for he always considered himself "on duty." One day he was recalled from the mountain, where he had been preparing a much delayed climb, by a telegram from his Prime Minister. After opening it at the hotel, he merely remarked: "It is a pity, it was not very urgent."

One of the King's favourite spots was the small Italian town of Cortina d'Ampezzo. It was in order to prepare himself for another journey to the Dolomites that he went to Marche-les-Dames on February 17th 1934. For a period of fifteen years, interrupted only by the War, he undertook a long series of climbs in the Trentino, the Ateso and the Brenta. The long catalogue of his ascents would only interest the experts. No year passed without adding the names of a number of peaks and mountains to his diary. He made up for the disadvantages of size and shortsightedness by practice and by what his companions called his "cool audacity."

Climbing became more and more a physical and spiritual need. On several occasions, King Albert expressed this

feeling. He "needed some relaxation from time to time." He could not "keep fit without exercise." On his way to Palestine, in 1933, he flew from Athens to Cairo, which he reached in the afternoon, and managed to scale the great pyramid before starting by air for Gaza the same evening. This was considered an ordinary day's journey. He would have discovered a pretext for scaling something in the flattest and most monotonous stretch of land. When the Alps were out of reach, even small hills and great monuments would serve their purpose. A purely sedentary life was unbearable, and it is characteristic that in his study in Lacken, beside his desk overloaded with files and books, stood one of these appliances with sliding seat which help rowers to keep in training.

It is the fashion among modern biographers to discover in their subject some physical weakness which is supposed to affect his work and explain his shortcomings. King Albert enjoyed almost perfect health and feared illness no more than any other calamity; but he certainly must have dreaded the day when he would have to give up his favourite sport. All those who approached him remarked on his youthful appearance. At fifty-eight, he looked scarcely more than forty-five. He had always been handicapped by his weight and, on several occasions, had been prevented through strict prudence from completing the last stage of a particularly dangerous climb, and obliged to wait, close to the summit, for the return of some lighter and much envied companion. While congratulating the latter, he could not refrain from expressing the regret that he had not been able to follow him to the end. These "pannes," as they are called by French alpinists, had become more frequent in later years. It is told that, when stopped in a particularly difficult position with a fellow climber somewhat older than himself, he exclaimed: "I believe that two people whose total age reaches 120 years have never clung to a more uncomfortable rock. Poor old fellows!"

According to Sir James Barrie, there is at least one child

who refused to grow up. King Albert was a kind of adult Peter Pan who refused to grow old. Had he done so, his spirit would certainly have remained young, but he would have lost that perfect balance between body and soul which he so jealously preserved. Life would perhaps have ceased to be a great adventure, and he could no longer have found, in overcoming physical dangers, the energy which allowed him to surmount political obstacles.

(3) He was an indefatigable worker. He never got up later than seven in the morning and, after hastily swallowing a large bowl of milk, started his day by perusing a number of Belgian, English, French, German and Dutch papers. Then, with the help of his secretary, he dealt with his correspondence and public affairs. During the pre-War period, he usually took his lunch with the Queen and their children and appeared loaded with papers and reviews which he distributed to them, saying, "this is your task for to-day." In later years, he often had a frugal lunch brought into his study and went on with his work, if he had not to preside over a ministerial council or to give an audience. When at Laeken, he sometimes took a drive; otherwise he devoted his afternoon to reading all kinds of books dealing with geography, history, social questions, politics, science and occasionally modern literature, even light fiction. He used to take note of all passages which retained his attention, and sometimes added a personal remark. One of the social reforms which he wholeheartedly supported was the eight-hour day, but it is doubtful whether he observed it himself.

His appetite for reading matched his keenness in sport and travelling. When he could not wander through the world, he journeyed not only through heaps of papers and periodicals, but through piles of the latest books which accumulated on his writing table. The subjects of his readings altered through his life not so much owing to a change of outlook as because he wished to follow the

questions which directly or indirectly might affect Belgian life. During the pre-War period, he devoted more of his time to science and purely social problems, while, towards the end of his reign, his attention was absorbed by economic and political questions. It was his constant practice to order a large number of recent books which he sent to his library at Laeken after he had read them. The list published below<sup>1</sup> contains the titles of about 160 works which reached the library during December 1933 and January 1934. It includes a number of books published between 1925 and 1930, which were evidently consulted for reference. Making allowance for these, the King must have perused, on an average, two volumes every day. He preferred French translations, when obtainable, but read with almost equal speed, English, German and Italian as well as Flemish.

If it were possible to gather a more extensive list, it could be shown that King Albert's interests were even more catholic than they appear to be from this document. He was always looking ahead and, since it was obviously impossible to keep abreast of every subject, preferred to sacrifice those on which he already possessed sufficient information. This explains why, apart from a few works on the Congo and on social questions, Belgium occupies apparently a minor position, but the country always stood foremost in his mind, and he followed carefully any movement which might influence her future. Hence the paramount importance given to recent political and economic developments. During the last months of his life, he was deeply concerned with the financial difficulties resulting from the various policies followed with regard to currency, and with the effect of increased mechanization on world employment. The place given to Italian Fascism, Russian Sovietism and German Hitlerism is equally significant.

Most readers will be somewhat surprised at the prominent part occupied by fiction and fantasy. A number

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix IV.

of these works were, no doubt, read as a relaxation, but the King found in others a very valuable source of information which completed the precise data provided by more ponderous books dealing with the same subject. Every question had, for him, a psychological as well as a purely objective aspect, and the opinions of novelists and satirists were not likely to be discounted. It was not enough for him to consider the external features of important political or social changes, he wished to know the opinions of those who were affected by them. In this way, the imagination of sensitive writers gave him an insight into these questions which he could not have found elsewhere.

He confessed this taste for novels to the Belgian author, Henri Davignon: "It is a family taste," he declared, "my father read many of them, so did my grandfather, Leopold I. It is a means we use in our profession to penetrate among surroundings with which we can only seldom come into contact."

Only a modern humanist of the broadest views and the widest interests could collect on his table within a few weeks, works signed by Ferrero, Mauriac, Roosevelt, Wells, d'Annunzio, Valéry, Ludwig, Aldous Huxley, Feuchtwanger, Duhamel, Axel Munthe, Sinclair Lewis, Stresemann, Léon Daudet, Lord McChett, Maurois, Kautsky, Henri Béraud, Harold Nicolson, René Benjamin, Winston Churchill, Maeterlinck, Blasco Ibáñez, Knickerbocker, Gabriel Hanotaux and Heinrich Mann, to quote only a few of the best known names.

"It was in the castle of Laeken," writes M. Daye, "that the King preferred to work, when he was not kept by his audiences in Brussels, where he was driven every morning with the punctuality of a good civil servant. Besides suites of reception rooms, there are, in the castle, studies where documents, books and reviews are classified and carefully indexed. These studies contrast strangely . . . with intimate drawing-rooms full of flowers and knick-knacks. In his audience room in Brussels, which was better known

to visitors, the King did not sit before a desk, but before a marble-topped table covered with the latest books, reviews and papers. At the beginning of an audience which I was granted after my return from Moscow, he greeted me with a remark which I could not understand. He noticed my astonishment and said: "You do not realize what I am driving at?"—"No, Sire."—"Wait a moment." After searching through a pile of documents, he handed me laughing a Communist paper containing an article on my recent journey and accusing me of bad faith. Nothing escaped him."

He wrote a great many confidential letters, trusting in the loyalty of his correspondents. He never deleted and preferred to begin the letter again when he wished to make any alteration. In certain cases, following no doubt a habit of his childhood, he carefully erased a word, or part of a word. Once the letter ended, he slipped it into an envelope and rang for a servant to have it posted at once. There are no copies of these letters in the archives of the Palace. As the King frequently destroyed messages and documents which reached him from outside when they were not directly connected with State affairs, the study of this correspondence will be particularly difficult and is not likely to yield important results.<sup>1</sup>

For all important documents and speeches, King Albert drafted several rough copies; he carefully eliminated repetitions and substituted more appropriate terms to those he had first chosen. His style was always clear and full of matter, but somewhat heavy. He wrote as he talked, weighing all his words, and paying small attention to elegance or eloquence. Not that he despised them, for he admired great orators, particularly Jaurès, but through a scruple of conscience which prompted him to stress meaning rather than form. There was no doubt here again some distrust in his own powers, which only disappeared on solemn occasions, and perhaps, who knows, the idea that, for

<sup>1</sup> Max Leo Gérard in *Le Flambeau*, March 1914, p. 401.

his own work, precision and utmost sincerity must come first.<sup>1</sup>

He remained throughout an ideal scholar, combining the modesty of the student with the painstaking concentration of the true intellectual worker. Unless we take into account this element of conscientious assiduity, we miss one of the most striking features of his character. During his first journey to the Congo, he devoted some time every day to writing notes. He delivered only one speech, on the occasion of his visit to the mission of Kisantu and astonished his companions by the amount of knowledge he had gathered on the way and by the soundness of his views. Until the end of his life he tempered his eagerness for information with a natural reluctance to indulge in hasty generalizations. He was always learning.

The result of his intensive course of reading, helped by an excellent memory and pursued almost without interruption for thirty-five years, filled all those who approached the King with an astonishment mixed with some uneasiness, for they never knew what question would be put to them. He was not only fitted, as he expressed it himself, to be a "tolerable engineer" or a good explorer, he might have been a master interviewer, for he had a sufficient knowledge of every subject he approached to check the answers he received. Even those who had often visited the palace wished to be warned beforehand of the reason for which King Albert wished to see them. "I should like to know," said, on one occasion, the Governor of one of the most important Belgian banks, "on what subject he is going to question me. I must be prepared for my examination."

Few distinguished foreigners passed through Brussels without being asked to call at the palace. Statesmen, scientists, writers, engineers, explorers, doctors were received with equal cordiality but subjected to searching interrogatories. Compliments and evasions were of little avail, for they did not satisfy the insatiable curiosity of the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 382.

inquirer. There was never the slightest suggestion that even the boldest opinion, if sincrcely expressed, proved disagreeable, and frequently the conversation was prolonged, and drifted from special into general topics. This was considered as a great compliment for, in that case, the King did not wish merely to check or complete his own information, but desired to be better acquainted with the personality of a man whose qualities he had begun to appreciate. Several ministerial careers began in the audience chamber.

When heir to the throne, the Prince delighted the writer, George Rency, by his extensive knowledge of Belgian literature and of the works of de Coster, Pirmez, Lemire, Verhaeren, Maeterlinck and Giraud. In recent years, the King had an interview with a learned student of Marxism who declared, after meeting him, that he seemed to be almost as well versed in the subject as himself.<sup>1</sup>

After his death, it was reported that the last book he had read was the recently published *Révolution Nécessaire*, by Dandieu and Aron, and that he had written on the title page the words "*d'abord spirituelle*." It has been hitherto impossible to find any confirmation of this report, but it is nevertheless characteristic, because *La Révolution Nécessaire*, in spite or perhaps on account of the unorthodox views it expresses, is exactly the kind of work which would have attracted and retained the Sovereign's attention. The authors belong to the new school of French thinkers who consider that both Capitalism and Marxism have failed to realize the ideal of the "Revolution," which aims at preserving the rights of the individual against the tyranny of the State. They contend that the progress of mechanization and nationalization, and of various forms of political dictatorships, German, Italian, Russian, are threatening spiritual freedom, and that, unless a stand is made against these forces, civilization itself must sooner or later disappear. The suggestions made to meet the danger are open to criticism, but King Albert preserved an open mind in these

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

questions; he liked to look ahead, and would have been struck by the importance given by the authors in their scheme to moral and spiritual values—" *d'abord spirituelle.*"

(4) The attitude of King Albert towards scientific research is accurately expressed in a speech which he delivered in Seraing, in October 1927, on the occasion of the centenary of the foundation of the well-known Cockerill Works: "Modern science," he said, "opens new and almost infinite perspectives to the development of technique. It is within the research laboratories that the foundations of the industry of the future are laid down, and we can but feel *some uneasiness* in witnessing the scant material means placed to-day at the disposal of our scientists in order to pursue their studies. There is, in Belgium, a real crisis among scientific institutions and laboratories, and economic difficulties, arising from the War and after-war period, have rendered the public powers unable alone to take radical and decisive measures to remedy this evil. The Belgian public does not sufficiently understand that pure science is the indispensable condition of applied science, and that the nations who neglect science and scientists are condemned to decadence. Considerable and sustained efforts are needed if we wish—as we must—to maintain our rank and reputation. In our days, those who do not go forward, go backward."

"I am sure that the prominent industrialists who listen to me, understand this perfectly. I ask them to think frequently of our Universities, our special schools, our laboratories. The field is wide open in this domain to private initiative. Following well-known examples, less frequent until now in Belgium than in certain foreign countries, we must all together find practical means of promoting and encouraging the labours of our research workers and scientists."

This speech is only the development of an idea already expressed by King Albert in the early years of his reign<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> See p. 76.

The prosperity of an overpopulated and exporting country depends on her methods of production and the education of her technicians; these are intimately linked up with the progress of inventions and applied science; but the latter would soon be paralysed if scientists were not allowed to pursue their disinterested research work without any thought of the practical results to which it might lead. Scientific inquiry is "a kind of intellectual duty," apart from all other considerations; if this duty were to be ignored or discouraged owing to a short-sighted outlook, applied sciences would soon suffer in consequence, and national industrial progress would be seriously hampered.

The Prince had been a skilful engineer, working in his own workshop on motor car repairs, adapting motors to the fishing boats of the *Ibis*. The young King, after taking special interest in the experiments of Ader and the Wright brothers, had, in 1910, urged Parliament to encourage the beginning of the Belgian flying industry, when its importance was still denied by many. He had, in the same year, devoted special attention to wireless, and established a workshop in the park of Laeken which became the cradle of Belgian radio-electric industry and provided, during the War, the means of communicating with Liège and Namur, after these towns had been surrounded by the enemy. As early as 1911, anxious to establish direct communications with the Colony, he conceived the "bold dream" of linking it up by wireless with the Metropolis. Experiments of radio-telephony were also carried out at Laeken and, on March 28th 1914, a special concert was broadcast in honour of the Queen.

In these years, King Albert insisted on several occasions on the important part to be played by the engineers formed by Belgian Universities. They were "the links between the immense world of production, and the superior sphere where science and higher culture are pursued." With the passing of time, the importance of the latter loomed larger and larger on his horizon. Fearing the dangerous

reaction towards utilitarian methods which followed the War, he became the champion of purely scientific interests.

The appeal made at Seraing, in October 1927, was renewed, a month later, at a joint meeting organized in Brussels at the *Palais des Académies* by the Universities of Brussels and Louvain. This demonstration was in itself a proof that Liberals and Catholics were ready to join forces in the interests of science, and that the old feud which separated the two universities had to a great extent abated: "Science which creates so much riches," declared the King on that occasion, "is itself poor. Scientists must be relieved from material worries in order to concentrate their efforts on research. Everything must be done to awake, encourage and support scientific vocations. . . ." He had been grieved to see many brilliant university students compelled to give up their studies for a more remunerative occupation, and was determined to check further intellectual waste.

The answer was so successful that, in less than three months, the *Fonds de Recherches Scientifiques* collected over 100 million francs provided by banks, industry, commerce and private individuals. As usual, the King headed the list of subscribers. The new institution has already rendered invaluable service in many fields, notably by subsidizing the enterprises of Professor Piccard and his followers for the exploration of the stratosphere.

The King would have been the last to claim the knowledge of a specialist. No man obsessed by such heavy responsibilities could find time to keep abreast of developments in any single branch, but he was so well grounded in mathematics, physics and chemistry that, in many cases, he was able to form his own judgment concerning the fruitfulness of certain inventions, and he was sufficiently scientifically minded to know that, if investigations were to be profitable, research workers should be able to pursue them without being deflected from their course by utilitarian motives.

Geography and history remained to the last among his favourite subjects. One of the chief reasons for his admira-

tion of King Leopold was the geographical sense which he had shown on the return of Stanley's first expedition to the Congo. "After I left the Government," wrote M. Vandervelde, "I had several talks with the King on travel and kindred subjects. His conversation was peculiarly interesting when he spoke of geography in connection with international politics."

In King Albert's youth most Belgian historians still interpreted mediæval events in the light of modern history and represented the fight of the Flemish Communes against the French Kings, in the fourteenth century, of the Belgian Provinces against Spain, in the sixteenth, and of the Belgian revolutionaries against the Dutch King in 1830, as so many manifestations of national patriotism. However satisfactory this theory might have been from the point of view of Belgian nationalism, King Albert was too well informed not to realize that it could not stand the test of modern criticism. He had studied Pirenne's monumental history of Belgium and fully realized the importance of local tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Unity had not been achieved in Belgium, as in France or England, by bringing feudal powers into the hands of the Sovereign; it was based on the gradual welding of French and German principalities which depended more and more on each other for the safeguard of their independence and franchises. The work of centralization begun by the Dukes of Burgundy and by Charles V was interrupted during the following centuries and only realized by force, under French domination. The special devotion of the people to their local institutions recognized by the constitution of 1830, did not imply any disloyalty to the State and could not be opposed to an enlightened patriotism. It was "a source of strength, not of weakness," and even if it led to some exaggerated claim, should be given due understanding and sympathy.

<sup>1</sup> "I am glad," he wrote to Prof. Pirenne in 1912, "to express my admiration and keen sympathy to the eminent historian who placed our national life in its true light, in its continuity throughout the centuries."

It was largely owing to his knowledge of history that King Albert dealt with such tact and moderation with the manifestations of Separatism which caused so much indignation in 1929. By acknowledging and even encouraging sound regionalism based on historical traditions, he was able to show that his opposition to the Front Party, far from being based on political prejudice, was founded on wise statesmanship. At no time in Belgian history, not even in the Early Middle Ages, had political frontiers coincided with linguistic frontiers. Separatism would not only mean the end of Belgian independence, it would mean the ruin of the efforts pursued for many centuries by Flemings and Walloons belonging to the various principalities and provinces, to co-operate in the defence of this independence. The appeasement which followed King Albert's centenary speeches was partly due to the fact that he had drawn a firm line between those who had been misled by their enthusiasm for their language and culture and those who had become the prey of racial fanaticism.<sup>1</sup>

(5) As a man of action, bent on improving the condition of his people and consolidating their situation in Europe, the King was naturally more inclined to concentrate on political and social problems than on art, music or literature. The latter were the special province of his Queen, who being herself a keen musician and a lover of art, wished to give to her Court, in pre-War days, the intellectual prestige which several German Courts had so deservedly enjoyed in the past. "The Queen," writes M. Dumont-Wilden, "loved the society of artists, particularly of musicians. She appreciated the talent of the American pianist, Walter Rummel, who often played for her and for a small circle of amateurs which she had gathered at the palace. She liked to organize musical evenings at which she played herself, accompanied by amateurs or professionals. The King frequently listened to these concerts, in which he took

<sup>1</sup> See p. 378.

great pleasure." It might be added that the great violinist Ysaye, and some of his pupils were frequently invited, and introduced to Court circles the works of the Liégeois composer, César Franck, and of some of his Belgian disciples, such as Lekeu and Jongen.

The Queen delighted in organizing private performances of little-known operas, for which she engaged artists of the *Théâtre de la Monnaie* and of the *Conservatoire*. Nothing escaped her attention, and when a group of artists and amateurs improvised a successful "revue" at the Brussels *Cercle Artistique* they were asked to repeat their performance at Laeken.

Allusion has already been made to the King's friendship for the poet Verhaeren.<sup>1</sup> "His spontaneous and outspoken nature did not seem adaptable to a courtly atmosphere," writes M. Dumont-Wilden, "but the Sovereigns were touched by his youthful enthusiasm and the instinctive poetry of his personality. Verhaeren dined several times at Laeken, alone with the King and Queen. Once started, he loved to talk, pouring forth his impressions and his picturesque memories of literary life. The Sovereigns listened, happy to discover a man behind this poet. Verhaeren never passed through Brussels without being invited. 'Who would have dreamt,' he said one day, 'that I should ever be a court poet. But, you know, it is not a Court like the others, it can scarcely be called a Court!'"

It is again characteristic of King Albert's humanism that he was so easily drawn towards art and literature. Most great men are inclined to concentrate on the activity or on the subject in which they excel, and to minimize the importance of the others. Few succeed in maintaining a youthful attitude towards life and in preserving an open mind, ready to receive fresh impressions. For the King, there was no gap between art and science, truth and beauty; they both made up intellectual life "on which the prestige of a country depends." Even statesmanship and

<sup>1</sup> See p. 292.

poetry could be linked together. Presiding over a lecture given by Verhaeren in 1908, Prince Albert had said: "The genius of a race appears not only in economic power, but also in the expansion of arts, letters and science. It behoves a country to honour her poets, writers and artists; they are the artisans of her greatness, they inspire the nation's conscience; they write her history in indelible pages; they spread afar her renown in the intangible and pacific domain of the mind. . . . Let us develop everywhere the desire for true culture, reflecting the love of goodness and beauty."

Twenty-two years later, the King inaugurated at Bruges a monument commemorating the great Flemish poet Guido Gezelle. Speaking this time in Flemish, he expressed and emphasized the same thought, applying it to the founder of modern Flemish poetry. A nation, he said, must honour her great men, and among her great men the poets stand foremost, for "the true poet bears with him the highest values of his people. He identifies himself with their deepest traditions. In his soul throbs the very soul of the race. Guido Gezelle is poet of the Grace of God, he lives in his language, he is the word which enriches our human heart. The beauty of nature is engraved in his work; this Fleming gives us the highest vision of the universe."

The King gave many concrete proofs that the feelings he professed in these speeches were based on deeply rooted conviction. The Constitution gave him the right to confer titles on his most distinguished subjects, and his post-War policy had been to reward in this way many services rendered by private individuals to the State. Painters, sculptors and writers form an important proportion of this new nobility. An examination of individual cases would show that a number of these Barons and Counts of the brush and pen were not necessarily brought into personal contact with the Sovereigns. Their merit alone was considered a sufficient reason for distinction. The author of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is now Count Maeterlinck.

In pre-War years Belgium possessed an Academy of the Flemish language, but strangely enough, no corresponding body existed for French. In August 1920, this omission was repaired by the creation of the *Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Française*, consecrating officially the efforts made by the writers of the "*Scène Belge*" to give their country a literature in French expressing the temperament of their own land.

Unless this should suggest that the Sovereign was under any illusion as to the value of official encouragement given to art and literature, the following letter must be quoted. It was addressed on March 6th 1908, by Prince Albert to M. Lefèbvre: "In my opinion, the principal defect of all Academies is to create a close body (*cénacle*) whose members discourage progress and scorn on principle all new-comers who do not acknowledge their infallibility. Academicians are thus inclined to promote an official art. On the other hand, as you rightly point out, it is necessary for us to attract the public's attention to our writers and our literature and an Academy might fill this purpose to a certain extent, especially if it were organized as you suggest."<sup>1</sup>

The Sovereigns attended, in pre- and post-War years, numberless art exhibitions, concerts and dramatic performances. This patronage was not exclusively national. The banquet of the Royal Literary Fund in 1921 has already been mentioned. When, in 1929, the Anglo-Belgian Union organized an exhibition of British Art in Brussels, following the 1927 Exhibition of Flemish Art at Burlington House, the King and Queen were present at the opening. In November 1933, King Albert accepted the invitation of the Committee of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* to take the chair at their annual dinner. He insisted on that occasion on the gratitude due to France by Belgian writers: "Lemounier, Eekhoud, Verhaeren and many others who have honoured my country by their works have . . . received from you this literary discipline based

<sup>1</sup> Archives of the *Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Française*.

on high tradition, which beyond our deceptions and miseries, places its trust only in immortal beauty."

There is almost a touch of envy in the way in which the King sometimes praised the creators of artistic masterpieces, as if he had wished that it had been his lot to carry out his own work in such an atmosphere of detached serenity.

Brussels lacked a large concert hall and a gallery worthy of the important art exhibitions so frequently held in the Capital. Leopold II wished to see a *Palais des Beaux Arts*, which might have filled this purpose, erected in the rue de la Régence. This building, however, was used instead as a permanent museum, and the problem remained unsolved until 1928, when a new *Palais des Beaux Arts*, built by a private society, was inaugurated. It was then disclosed that the initiative was once more due to the Sovereign who, a few months before the War, had urged upon Burgomaster Max the necessity of realizing his predecessor's project. The King did not hide his satisfaction: "This ceremony," he declared on this occasion, "shows the power of private initiative when it is placed at the service of a fine idea. It proves that neither artists nor scientists are neglected in Belgium, and that the public understands more and more the part which they play in enriching the moral patrimony of the nation."

Together with the Queen he took a special interest in the growing *Musée du Cinquantenaire*, devoted mainly to archaeology. Many are the occasions on which he was seen wandering through some Belgian gallery, as an ordinary visitor, questioning the attendants in order to assure himself that the treasures of Belgian art were properly cared for. He was not, however, "museum-minded" and remembered that works of art lose a great deal of their value when torn from their natural or artistic surroundings. The best place for a picture is the church for which it has been painted, and for a building the surroundings in which it was erected: "If we listened to our museum keepers," he

remarked one day, laughing, "we should place the Pyramids under glass cases."

During the last years of his reign, he nursed the plan of giving Brussels a truly up-to-date library, the present one being used as an extension to the Museum of Fine Arts.

This plan will be realized by the erection of the new *Bibliothèque Albertine* as a national memorial.

(6) King Albert was a great "preserver." This man of modern outlook, so fond of technical progress, was ever anxious to check the ruthlessness of industrialism. He witnessed with alarm the useless disfigurement of old towns and natural scenery. In pre-War days he had given special encouragement to the official *Commission des Monuments et des Sites*, which had been engaged on drawing up a comprehensive list of all Belgian buildings of historic or artistic interest, to be preserved in their present state. He saw to it that this commission, including, besides architects and art experts, a few art lovers, exerted its influence during the period of reconstruction,<sup>1</sup> and he approved the initiative taken by some of its members to extend State protection to natural scenery. Through a remarkable coincidence, the very first site placed on the list was the rocky cliff of Marche-les-Dames; the Sovereign gave his formal approval of this decision a few days only before the fatal accident.

He liked trees to be kept wild, and boasted on several occasions that in his own Park of Laeken no sound branch had been cut off for a century. He grew particularly alarmed, in the months following the War, at the rapid deforestation which took place in certain parts of the country, and urged his minister, Comte Carton de Wiart, to take stringent measures in order to stop or limit the useless cutting down of trees: "I am sending you the enclosed article," he wrote to him, on December 9th 1920, "to draw the attention of the protector of our sites and forests to the terrible hecatomb of trees which is taking place everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 363.

If it goes on, every oak-tree will disappear from the country round Brussels. Specially towards the North, where I go frequently, rows of trees which made the beauty of the brabantian landscape are being sacrificed. . . . It might be useful to inquire whether the report which is being drawn up by the *Conseil supérieur des Forêts* has reached some conclusion, and whether there are no means of protecting through legislation a proportion of trees which ought to be preserved for climatic, hydrographic or even æsthetic reasons.”<sup>1</sup>

Love of nature and love of art were interdependent for him, and he never shared the attitude of the “pure æsthete” who prefers a picture to the landscape it represents. Nature was the inexhaustible source from which men drew their inspiration. Its destruction would soon bring about the decadence of art. Science was equally interested in the preservation of some stretches of land, in their primitive state.

If it became more and more difficult to realize this scheme on a large scale in Europe, it was still possible to do so in the Colony, but it should be done before the big game hunters had time to destroy some rare species and before changes brought about by civilization altered the conditions of the flora.

The idea of creating a National Park in Africa occurred to the King during his journey to the United States, after the War, while he visited the great American reserves. After consulting several American and Belgian naturalists, among whom were Carl Akeley and Doctor Derscheid, he chose a large stretch of country between Lake Kivu and Lake Albert, in the remotest corner of the Colony. The first decree referring to the Park appeared in April 1925, and was greeted with enthusiasm, especially in England and in America, where the National Academy passed a resolution congratulating the Sovereign on his initiative.

The character of the new reserve was explained by the Sovereign himself in October 1929, when he installed

<sup>1</sup> Comte Carton de Wiart: *Mémoires*.

the Commission entrusted with its administration: "This National Park," he declared, "is unique in the world, through the infinite variety of its flora and fauna, derived from its geographical position, its geological structure and the great differences of altitude, varying from 2,700 to 13,500 feet in the territory. I am convinced that, in later years, it will acquire an inestimable value for the scientists and for those who love nature and who take an interest in it." And he added: "People talk a great deal to-day, and with reason, of the preservation of the monuments of the past. Here you have also a monument to preserve, a monument built up by nature in the course of thousands of years and which has come to us as it has shaped itself from the earliest days of the world. By opening to the researches of the scientists an exceptionally interesting region, Belgium will make a fresh contribution to the progress of science and its applications."

The brief air journey undertaken, in the spring of 1932, had no other purpose than the inspection of the new National Park, and the Sovereign derived unbounded satisfaction in witnessing the realization of one of his most cherished projects. Among the many memorials dedicated to him there is none which would have pleased him more than the safeguarding of natural scenery in any part of the world.

Love of nature was thus the foundation of King Albert's humanism, of his scientific and artistic interests and even of his love of sport. Talking of his Alpine experiences, he said one day that the mountains appeared to him beautiful "because they had remained in their *primaevum* state." Though he could scarcely be called romantic, he nursed an almost Ruskinian wonder for virgin land and for solitude.

In the course of his official journeys, he loved to escape from the crowd and snatch a few moments' peace in some quiet spot. During the days spent in Rome, on the occasion of the marriage of his daughter, he confessed that he had "sought refuge" in the Pincio. At Santa Barbara, California,

during his American tour, he entered into conversation with a Belgian journalist, M. Goemaere, whom he found resting on the shore. After some reflection on the loneliness of the spot, the Sovereign said, looking at the sea: "We cannot feel dull when we are alone. . . . It is more on account of others that life appears tedious." His companion having quoted the words of Anatole France: "Life would be bearable without its pleasures"—he added: "Yes, the obligations imposed upon us by others, so that we should share their pleasures are often tedious. A man free to dispose of his time should never be bored. Boredom is the sure sign of a mediocre mind. Such people are weary because, when alone, they are with themselves."<sup>1</sup> He no doubt remembered Montaigne's words: "A man of understanding has lost nothing as long as he owns himself."

This man of action, who had made it his business to meet so many people, who showed so much affection and kindness to those who surrounded him, who even took a special delight in rubbing shoulders with a crowd under the shelter of incognito, this true lover of the people for whom the masses never were an anonymous power to be flattered or conciliated, but a collection of human beings in need of protection against others or even against themselves, was also a dreamer, fond of solitude and contemplation. To the end of his life he was awed by the mystery of nature and comforted by its undisturbed beauty. With the old humanists he might have repeated *humani nihil a me alienum puto*, but with them, he preserved in the deep recess of his soul a yearning for something more. He felt the limitation of human knowledge and achievement, the vanity of human pride.

(7) The key-note of King Albert's life and mind was the importance he attached to "moral values." He was not content with saying that "prosperity was not enough," he would have added that intellectual life, civilization itself

<sup>1</sup> P. Goemaere: *Albert I en de Mensche*.

were without significance, unless they brought us to a higher standard and raised our minds to a better understanding of our duties and responsibilities. All things which interested him, sport, technical progress, science, research, art and literature were only means towards one end: "the improvement of the human soul." This was the theme of all his speeches, of all his writings, from the early years when he prepared himself so assiduously for his royal mission, to the very last day of his reign.

He emphasized it at the time of his Accession to the throne: "Riches create duties for the people as for the individual; a nation's intellectual and *moral forces* can alone make her prosperity fruitful." He repeated it on the occasion of the opening of the Liège Exhibition in 1930: "Such exhibitions allow us to take stock of the progress realized, to understand the necessity of raising always higher the material welfare of the population and, above all, of increasing unceasingly the *moral forces* which are the very life of a nation." Again, at Mons, in the same year: "These improvements—the social conditions of the workers—will prepare the way for new and happy developments . . . inasmuch as the consciousness of *moral* and intellectual *values* influences the citizen's outlook."

The King was no less emphatic when he spoke of science than when he dealt with technical or social progress. Inaugurating the new installation of the University of Brussels in 1930, he declared that "the benefactors of science were the benefactors of mankind. . . . In a world still too much divided against itself, where the solidarity of interests, however evident, is only recognized gradually through many difficulties, science appears as an element of union and concord. Intellectual co-operation is an important agent of pacification. . . . Founded on disinterestedness, it assumes an unquestionable *moral value*, and we must hope that its influence will spread as its services are better appreciated."

In this light, the 1930 speeches may be considered not

only as a political but also a philosophical testament. The King insists on the interdependence of employees and employers and returns again and again to his favourite idea that the manual worker, the engineer, the scientist and the research worker co-operate in the same task which, to be fruitful, must improve the hearts of men. In Brussels, at the *Exposition du Travail*, he declares that the welfare of a modern nation can only be sustained through the common efforts of all: "It is impossible to imagine the labourer, without visualizing at his side the technician and the intellectual worker; the scientist and the simple workman complete each other; each in his sphere, ensures the harmony of social life and contributes to the progress of mankind."

The same guiding principle was applied by King Albert to art and literature. They should be encouraged not only because they add to the nation's prestige, but because they express her highest aspirations and because, ultimately, the search for beauty as well as for truth ennobles the human spirit. When he came over to London in 1921 to preside over the annual dinner of the Royal Literary Fund, he dwelt on the importance of the written word: "Happily," he said, "literary production was not checked by the War. Never was a keener interest shown in poetry than during those years of intense strain, when those who struggled and those who suffered sought comfort in the highest sphere of thought." Our work of restoration would be incomplete if it were limited to the reconstruction of factories. Prosperity is not in itself an end, "it is a means of attaining a higher conception of life."

On many occasions, the King asserts his belief that national prosperity, and more particularly the improvement of labour conditions, must raise the moral standard. Untiring efforts should therefore promote applied sciences and technical inventions on which this prosperity depends. Since applied sciences are intimately connected with pure science, all means should be placed at the disposal of research workers. But there is another and perhaps more

important reason for favouring their activity. Together with poets and artists, they stimulate a disinterested intellectual activity which is the essential condition of moral development.

From whatever angle we consider King Albert's conception of social life, we always reach the same conclusion. A minimum of comfort is necessarily for physical and moral health; education makes men more tolerant and kind-hearted; higher culture, whether of the sciences or of the arts, exalts their minds towards an ideal of truth, beauty and goodness. This conception may be criticized on purely rational grounds; but for the King it was not so much based on such grounds as on common sense and religious belief. Had he been questioned about the true meaning of those "moral values" which he so often mentioned, he would no doubt have asked his questioner to consult his own heart. There are in all civilized societies certain principles of loyalty, justice and charity which cannot easily be defined, but which are readily acknowledged by all men of goodwill. The King was far too busy to spend much time on definitions, he preferred to work and to act.

### (B) Religion

(1) King Albert was by birth and education a Roman Catholic, but never lost sight of the fact that half his subjects either did not share his religious beliefs or were even opposed to them. Ruling over a divided community and realizing that he could find able and trustworthy ministers and advisers in all parties, he preserved in political matters that impartiality which is one of the most valuable traditions of the Belgian Monarchy. As a private man, he was a faithful son of the Church, but as a King he was not more inclined to favour Catholic than Liberal or Socialist tendencies. His religious convictions belong for this reason not so much to his public, as to his private life.

He always treated the Head of his Church with the utmost loyalty and consideration. At the beginning of the Great War, when so many Belgians grew indignant at the uncertain attitude of Benedict XV, he silenced some criticisms by remarking: "After all, he is our Father, and sons should not attack their father."

On the occasion of his visit to Rome in 1922, he was anxious to conciliate in every possible way the Pope's susceptibilities. As Father de la Brière expressed it, he was the first "to venture on the frail bridge thrown between the Quirinal and the Vatican."<sup>1</sup> Again in 1926, after the betrothal of Prince Leopold with Princess Astrid of Sweden, he succeeded in overcoming the difficulties arising from the marriage of a Catholic Prince with a Protestant Princess, with the full approval of the Belgian clergy. When, four years later, the Duchess of Brabant was converted to Catholicism, he wrote to the Pope in order to inform him of the event, and to tell him how happy he was that "all the members of his family should again be Catholics."

He once declared: "There are two splendid vocations for those who really wish to come in contact with the people, that of officer and that of priest."

Whenever he heard that someone he knew had taken holy orders, he was strangely moved. Writing to his old friend, General Comte de Grunne, who entered the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous in 1921, he expressed the wish that lie would "spend many years in the supreme comfort of the soul which faith in God Almighty's power, and trust in His goodness, give to those who have been touched by Grace." In October 1927, M. Lou Tseng Tsing, ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, wrote to him that he was preparing to enter the Abbey of St. André at Bruges. M. Lou had been married to a Belgian lady and, after her death, had decided to end his life in a monastery. Having met King Albert on the occasion of a diplomatic mission in 1914, he wished to inform him of his decision and of the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 386.

reason which prompted it. He expected a formal acknowledgment through the Sovereign's secretary, but received instead an autograph letter: "I have read with emotion the touching homage which you pay to my compatriot, the much regretted Madame Lou, in the letter which you send me, at the moment of entering the illustrious order of St. Benedict. I very much appreciate the proof of confidence which you give me, in informing me of the feelings which contributed to your holy vocation. . . . To devote oneself wholly to the service of our Lord is the only means for those who are touched by Grace to receive the peace of soul which is the supreme happiness on earth. I recommend myself to your prayers, my Reverend Father, and assure you of my deep esteem."

It is often mentioned that the Countess of Flanders had given Prince Albert a sound religious education, but it is sometimes forgotten that, on his own initiative, he pursued his course of theological studies for several years after becoming heir to the throne. While taking his religious duties very seriously, the Sovereign did not wish to make an outward show of them and his natural reserve must be respected. His instructors and confessors have been naturally reluctant to speak on this subject. There are, however, one or two testimonies which should be recorded, because they reveal unplumbed depths in the King's inner conscience.

Talking a few years ago to Dom Albert van der Cruyssen, Prior of the Abbey of Orval, he expressed the regret that so many people should still be dominated by pride and consider service as humiliating. This evil ran through the whole social body from the unemployed, who refused to undertake work which he considered beneath his dignity, to the aristocrat who would not share a meal in the company of his chauffeur: "My mother has taught me humility," he added, "and I have always fared well by her teaching." He told the Prior that when he paid a surprise visit to his castle of Ciergnon, he took a special pleasure in preparing a simple meal with his old caretaker and sharing it with

him. He added that he admired the rule established in missions and monasteries according to which service was a pleasant duty and not a mean occupation, and contrasted the Roman rule, based on pride and force, with the ideal Christian State in which humility and charity should temper order and discipline.

He never missed his Sunday Mass when it was at all possible for him to attend it. The air bombardments to which La Panne was regularly subjected did not prevent him from going to church. On one occasion, all the congregation having escaped to shelter underground, he remained alone, kneeling with the priest before the altar. When the scare was over, the King congratulated the agitated curé on his calm behaviour.

At Ciergnon, he used to take his place before the confessional among the village people and refused their offers to make way for him. During his journey to the Congo in 1932, he arrived on a Saturday on the southern bank of Lake Albert, and forthwith sent for the priest to the neighbouring mission of Luenga, so that he might hear Mass the next day. In India, he gave up an important excursion which had been planned for a Sunday on account of the early hour of departure: "You have forgotten Mass," he remarked; "that must come before all."

When in the Colony, he would prolong his stay in remote missions, and loved to share the simple and frugal life of the missionaries. There are only three or four cases on record in which he displayed strong emotion in public. One of them was caused by the sight of a miserable old negro who approached the Communion bench among European officers: "Such partaking of the Sacrament" appeared to him "truly divine."

He went with the Queen to Palestine, in 1935, not as a tourist in search of picturesque sights, not even as an informed traveller interested in the Jewish and Arab questions, but as a true pilgrim, kneeling like the knights of old in every sanctuary. The story of the Gospel was always

in his mind, and on one occasion, he was found by his companions, after a prolonged absence, absorbed in meditation on the bank of Lake Genezareth. When the Sovereigns were shown, in Jerusalem, the site of Pilate's praetorium, they felt so stirred by the words of their learned guide, a Father of the *École Biblique*, that they spontaneously knelt before the steps leading to the first station in the "Via Dolorosa."<sup>1</sup>

In Amman the King was the guest of the British Resident. It was the first time since the twelfth century, when Baudouin IV of Jerusalem passed through the town on his way to the castle of Kerak, that the capital of Transjordania had been visited by a Belgian Prince. Albert I walked in the footsteps of the crusaders.

However scant our information on the King's religious life, we are led to the conclusion that it was not merely the outcome of tradition or education. Neither was it inspired solely by the desire to set an example to his people. Strict observance of duties was in accordance with his character and was by no means the only proof of his religious zeal. There are moments when his words and actions can only be explained by some spiritual need, some mystic aspiration. This was, no doubt, one of the reasons why so many observers were impressed by his "moral grandeur," by his "detachment from life," or at least from "ordinary pleasures and satisfaction."<sup>2</sup>

(2) King Albert's spiritual development is intimately connected with his friendship with Cardinal Mercier. These two great men were made to understand each other.

Monseigneur Mercier had become head of the Belgian Church in 1906, three years before the King's Accession. He had known him from his youth and followed the progress of his education. During the critical days of the siege of Antwerp, he had refused to leave the country

<sup>1</sup> Witnessed by Comte Guillaume de Grenne, who accompanied the Sovereigns in their journey.

<sup>2</sup> Sir George Graham in *The Times*, March 5th 1934.



15 - King Albert on the bank of Lake Grenezach (1955)

unless formally ordered to do so by his Sovereign, and there had been a tacit agreement between them that, while the Commander-in-Chief remained with his troops, the Archbishop would watch over his people.

Their resistance to the invader was based on the same fundamental principles, but while the Sovereign justified his attitude in terms of international law, the theologian quoted St. Thomas Aquinas and contended that all aggressive war was a violation of justice and a sin against charity: "No might is right," he wrote; "the use of force may be legitimate or illegitimate, that is to say, it may conform to, or be contrary to right; but the only legitimate use that any human government can make of force is to place it at the service of Law, to the end that Law may be enforced and respected." Statesmanship and theology met on safe ground.

Through the long struggle which followed, the Cardinal managed to communicate, on several occasions, with King Albert, who after the issue of the first Pastoral Letter of Christmas 1915, wrote to the Pope: "I express to the venerated Head of the Roman Catholic Church my admiration of Cardinal Mercier's conduct. Following the example of the glorious prelates of the past, he has not feared to proclaim the truth in the face of error, and to uphold the unwritten righteous cause of universal conscience."<sup>1</sup>

Four years later, after the return of the Sovereign to his country, the King and the Cardinal met again. The public homage which they paid to each other cannot express the warmth of their affection but gives an idea of their mutual esteem. "After God," preached the Cardinal, "Albert, King of the Belgians, is the author of the great moral victory which is being proclaimed throughout the world." And, on another occasion: "Albert I is a man of duty. He is what is meant by men of integrity when they speak of an 'honest fellow.' However great a soldier and head of the State he may be, it is not by his greatness

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Gade: *The Life of Cardinal Mercier*.

that King Albert has captivated the hearts of his subjects . . . but by his simplicity, uprightness and unaffected goodness."

King and Cardinal had many points in common. They shared the same genuine affection for the working-classes and strove with the same zeal to improve their conditions. They both agreed in the unity of intellectual development. The founder of Neo-Thomism believed in the reconciliation of science and religion, and the King-Humanist in the interdependence of the various branches of human activity. They were both essentially tolerant, advocating union against division, and eager to work with all men of goodwill even if they belonged to different churches or professed different political doctrines. While the Cardinal was engaged in the Malines Conversations with his friend Lord Halifax, the Sovereign gave his confidence and advice to Socialists and so-called republican ministers.

The study of one personality throws a new light on the other. More through the position in which he was born than through natural inclination, the King became a man of action, who from time to time experienced a strange yearning for contemplative life. In a similar way, the Cardinal had chosen a life of studies and meditation which he felt compelled to leave, first to become the leader of the Belgian clergy, and later the outspoken champion of an oppressed people. It seems as if their greatness rested almost as much on their potential as on their actual achievements. It is not only what they did which raises them above their contemporaries, but also the proofs they gave that they might have done almost as well in any field in which they had deemed it their duty to labour. No barrier screens the horizon of their lives.

Those who were received in the King's study in Brussels noticed, among the books and papers which encumbered the room, a small crucifix held by a bronze hand. A well-known Belgian lady had asked the Cardinal if he would consent to have a cast of his right hand made, as she

wished to raise funds by this means for a training school for nurses. He only agreed on condition that he might hold the small crucifix which never left him. The King had been the first to purchase a cast of his friend's hand and had placed it on his desk so that he could not raise his eyes from his work without seeing it.<sup>1</sup>

It has only recently been revealed that, in 1920, Cardinal Mercier suggested that the Holy Places should come under the special protection of King Albert. In the course of an interview with M. Clémenceau, the Cardinal spoke of the disappointment caused in Belgium by the Peace Treaty. He pointed out that a mandate in Palestine would give great satisfaction not only to the Belgians, but to Roman Catholics all over the world. The French Premier agreed with him, but expressed some doubt regarding the British attitude; he promised, nevertheless, to approach the President of the Republic and the Quai d'Orsay, but was prevented from doing so owing to political changes in France. The Cardinal considered no doubt that his King would have been worthy to succeed another Belgian Prince, Godfrey of Bouillon, who is said to have refused to wear a crown of gold "where his Master had worn a crown of thorns."

### (C) *Private Life*

The private life of great public men has never been subjected to more searching inquiry than at the present time. This is not the place to discuss how far these inquiries are justified and whether a true appreciation of a statesman, an artist or a man of science ought not to be based on his statesmanship, his masterpieces or his discoveries rather than on the conflicting reports of his personal relationship with those near to him. There is, however, a line which the keenest biographer ought never to cross not merely for reasons of discretion or decency, but because undue

<sup>1</sup> P. Nothomb: *Le Roi Albert*.

insistence on personal questions hampers impartial judgment.

(1) It has been written that "happy nations have no history." King Albert's marriage was a perfect marriage, and his home life was undisturbed. It is better left at that. He found at the side of his Queen the advice and comfort which he needed in times of doubt and stress. He was devoted to his children, and for this very reason brought them up with a firm hand, aware that in the position they occupied, a wise discipline was a necessary corrective of the flattery to which they were unavoidably exposed. In his happy home, whether in Brussels, Laeken, in the Ardennes or even at La Panne, he sought a refuge against the anxieties of war and the worries of peace. There were at least a few hours every day in which he could relax and discard ceremony. They gave him new reserves of energy and strengthened him against the difficulties of the morrow. There is a Belgian proverb, according to which even a "charcoal-burner is master in his house," and the King's greatest privilege was to enjoy this right with the humblest of his subjects. This explains, perhaps better than anything else, the imperturbable calm which he preserved through the gravest crises of his life. Drawing upon these reserves of intimate trust and serenity, he was able only to express displeasure or regret in circumstances in which even the strongest men might have been carried away by anger or distress.

M. Vital Plas, who was for some years the young Prince's tutor, has described in detail the life of the Royal Family in pre-War days at Laeken. It followed a regular course: "The King rose very early and walked in the park, after which he took a light breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m., and began to work. The Queen breakfasted somewhat later. Her children came to her about ten o'clock; they were in the habit of bringing her flowers, this at the King's suggestion. . . . Luncheon was taken at twelve, *en famille*;

some members of the royal household took part in it, and on some occasions the King or the Queen invited a visitor who had been received in the morning. . . . There were only two courses and dessert. The King always insisted on a separate course of vegetables which the children were obliged to eat, whether they liked it or not. ‘It is necessary for your health,’ he told them. They drank wine mixed with water, or beer, sometimes a glass of champagne, when there was a guest.<sup>1</sup>

“Coffee, smoking and talk followed, but the King never allowed the Queen to stay long, as she was ordered to rest for an hour. When she delayed he urged her to go, leading her by the shoulder to the door.

“The King resumed work with his secretaries or one of the ministers, and gave audiences until dinner when he had no ceremony to attend. The Queen either received her friends or went to a concert, an art exhibition, a hospital, or visited the sick privately. When they lived at Laeken, which they much preferred to the Brussels palace, they returned as early as possible in the afternoon. The King used to take motor rides in the neighbourhood. Before or after dinner, he and the Queen would walk arm and arm in the park; they visited the children’s gardens and the beehives which supplied the palace with honey.

“Dinner was served at seven-thirty; it was frugal and strictly intimate, neither strangers nor members of the household being invited. It was short and the children went to bed soon afterwards. When the parents had not to attend some theatre or concert, they spent the evening reading and retired early. Sometimes there was music.”

It has been said that nobody is a hero to his valet. Without doubt, the King and Queen made a *bon ménage*, even in the eyes of their servants, of the peasants at Giergnon, and of all those who had the opportunity of penetrating their intimacy. In the Ardennes, they some-

<sup>1</sup> In later years, they only drank water in private and followed a vegetarian diet; the King gave up smoking.

times arrived together with their children at a small inn, like ordinary tourists, and the innkeeper, knowing their wish not to be recognized, took his cue from them and addressed them as "Monsieur" and "Madame." He was rewarded by witnessing an intimate scene which would have done credit to the most united family in the village: "They talk as we talk," he declared, "and they have their jokes too."

This cheerful familiarity lasted until the end. A few months only before the fatal accident, Madame Carton de Wiart, who lives close to Marche-les-Dames, at the Château de Brumagne, received a telephone message from the Queen: "Might she come to lunch with them, and would it trouble them to give some lunch to her chauffeur? Could he be shown the surroundings? He was very fond of nature." While delighted to be hospitable to the Queen's chauffeur, Madame Carton de Wiart could not but wonder why so much importance was attached to the matter. This was explained a few hours later when the guests turned up, and the King was seen driving the car.

It was said that the *edelweiss* had played some humble part in the Queen's betrothal, and whenever the King journeyed alone in the Alps and was lucky enough to discover some during a climb, he never failed to bring the flowers back to her. "Take them," he said, "I have gathered them for you."

When he mentioned her to others, he spoke of her not as "the Queen," but as "my wife"; in the same way she said "my husband," and there was a strange touch of pride in this neglect of convention. He was never heard to raise his voice in her presence. People were at first astonished that some decisions had to be delayed until after lunch, or the next day. The reason became soon evident; a previous consultation between them was found necessary.

Queen Elisabeth may be considered as the constant collaborator of "her husband." She was at his side in all

the decisive hours of his life, and he had unbounded confidence in her sure instinct and sound judgment. For those who can read between the lines, it is evident that he paid her homage in public on several occasions without mentioning her name. When, for instance, in his great speech of November 22nd 1918, he said that "women have shown once more what may be expected of their goodness and of the intuition which helps them to discover the wound which should be dressed, and the grief which should be comforted," there is no doubt as to the lady he had particularly in mind.

We possess at least one picture of their intimate life connected with the great crisis of 1914, which has been carefully recorded by Baron van der Elst. As he came back, on August 1st, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs late in the evening, he was summoned to the palace and received by the King and Queen. For nearly an hour they examined together the danger which threatened the country, and the means which might be used to prevent it. The Queen took an active part in the conversation: "She spoke softly, almost timidly, expressing her thoughts in a series of questions, but each of them threw some light on the course to be followed. All her remarks were sound and betrayed a sure judgment and that peculiar tact which often makes women better psychologists than men." France had declared that she would respect Belgian neutrality. Germany, on the contrary, remained silent. In order to dispel these anxious doubts, the King wished to send, without delay, a personal letter to the Emperor.<sup>1</sup> Every phrase, every word, was carefully weighed. When the definite text had been drafted, the Queen suggested that it should be translated. Owing to her perfect knowledge of German, she was better placed than anyone to undertake the task. "She promptly set to work, but there were a few expressions which were particularly difficult to render accurately; she fetched a dictionary from the adjoining room, placed it on an arm-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 22.

chair beside her, and kneeling before the table, began to write, while the King, standing behind her, bent over her shoulder. Sometimes she stopped and explained why some word should be used, rather than another. Again and again, she moved the King aside in order to consult the dictionary.”<sup>1</sup>

The King’s attitude towards her has been summed up by his secretary, M. Ingenbleek: “The King had two main preoccupations, to watch over the country’s well-being, and to make the Queen happy.”

(2) Another bond of union between the Sovereigns was their common affection for their children, and the care which they lavished on their education. Like his predecessors, the King wished to prepare his children from their earliest years for the position they would be called upon to occupy in the State. This time, however, discipline was tempered not only with affection, but with the close intimacy which brought the family together.

There would be no graver mistake than to imagine that the Sovereign allowed his political preoccupations to interfere with his private life. State business came first, but once it was disposed of, he could be as carefree as anyone. He disliked idle talk and anything which flavoured of gossip, but like many shy and retiring men, he never lost his boyishness, and it was without any effort that he and the Queen shared in their children’s games and merriment. During the earlier years, the park of Laeken was their playground, and when they went for a holiday to Ciergnon, the fun was apt to become uproarious. The peasants who worked in the grounds saw the King, on one occasion, playing leapfrog over the ricks of hay scattered over the fields, amidst the laughter of his family. There is a typical story told at the village of Villers-sur-Lesse, of the Sovereign entering a small grocer’s shop with the two Princes, during an excursion, and asking for fifty centimes’

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Leclercq: *Albert, Roi des Belges.*

worth of bull's-eyes. "Ask for a franc's worth," hinted one of the Princes. But the father repeated in a decisive tone: "I said fifty centimes."

These incidents are common place enough, but they illustrate the deliberate intention of father and mother not to allow their family relationship to be affected by their social rank. However exacting the "trade of kingship," there was a limit beyond which it was not allowed to influence the ordinary course of life. The King and Queen remained "husband and wife," and the Princes and Princess were first of all their "children."

We possess a few details of the education given them in the days of the Rue de la Science. M. Vital Plas received precise and detailed instructions. The Princes had to work six or seven hours a day, and even during the holidays, at Ostend or Ciergnon, studies were not neglected, although the time-table was somewhat relaxed. No day passed without the father visiting the schoolroom.

When in 1909, before leaving for the Congo, Prince Albert wished to give a special tutor to his eldest son, he appointed Commandant (now General) Maton, with whom he had been closely connected from 1895 to 1900. He summed up his advice by saying: "Try to make a good citizen of him." When, at a later date, this officer consulted him on the choice of playmates for the heir to the throne, he answered: "Choose the sons of workers." The best preparation for the "trade of kingship" was the practice of social duties, and the most acceptable playmates for the young Princes were boys who were themselves preparing to follow their fathers' trades and professions.

M. Klobukowski relates an incident which occurred during a visit which he paid at La Panne. Prince Leopold, who had recently joined the army, wished to take leave of the French diplomat to attend his duties. The latter naturally made a movement to rise, but the King, laying his hand on his arm, prevented him, saying: "Please remain seated, M. le Ministre, Leopold might think too much of himself."

It was mainly through the affection and admiration they inspired by their kindness and example, that the King and Queen exerted their authority. "Through their well-ordered, simple and busy life," writes General Maton, "the parents spread among their family an atmosphere of sincerity and obedience to duty. . . . Their own personalities were the dominant influence on the development of their children."<sup>1</sup>

They did not wish, however, to keep them too long with them. The King shared his uncle's belief in the educational value of travel. "The Belgians are stay-at-homes," said he on one occasion, "my sons must travel." The decision to send Prince Leopold to Eton, from 1915 to 1919, was part of a plan of education which aimed at broadening his outlook by acquainting him with foreign countries and placing him in surroundings totally different from those to which he was accustomed. Leopold III is one of the best-travelled monarchs in Europe, having visited the United States, Brazil, Egypt and the Sudan, the Congo (in 1925 and again in 1933), Scandinavia, the Dutch East Indies, Siam, Indo-China and Hong Kong. Initiated in State affairs for several years, he was, according to his father's own words, "ready to succeed him."

The King's legitimate pride in his eldest son is shown in a letter which he wrote, as early as 1921, to Comte Carlton de Wiart, his Prime Minister: "I am touched by the favourable appreciation which you express concerning my eldest son. I value it all the more that it comes from one whom I hold in particular esteem. You may be convinced that all our efforts, the Queen's and my own, aim unceasingly at preparing our sons to fulfil the most important duties which the country has the right to impose upon the members of the dynasty."<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt about the Sovereign's partiality for English education. It appealed to him by its insistence on physical and moral training and its self-imposed discipline.

<sup>1</sup> *Le Flambeau*, March 1934.

<sup>2</sup> *Albert Ier, le Roi Chevalier*.

The system developed, in his opinion, a sense of responsibility most essential in a public career and supplemented usefully the more bookish education favoured on the Continent. After passing through a preparatory school, Prince Charles followed his brother at Eton and completed his education in British naval colleges and on board the *Renown*, spending no less than eleven years in this country.

King Albert was conscious of the invaluable influence of a Monarch's happy marriage on his popularity. At the time of the betrothal of the heir apparent in September 1926, he saw to it that his people should be informed of the circumstances which had brought about this event. He realized their distaste for diplomatic unions and wished to dispel any possible misunderstanding. Instead of instructing his secretary to send a formal communiqué to the papers, he took the unusual step of summoning the journalists to the Palace and addressed them in the following terms: "Gentlemen, I have asked you to come here to announce to you the betrothal of my eldest son with Princess Astrid, daughter of Prince Charles of Sweden, the brother of the King of Sweden and Princess Ingeborg, the sister of the King of Denmark. My son met her first during a journey in Scandinavia, and later at the baptism of Prince Michel, the son of Prince René de Bourbon. . . . They soon discovered their mutual feelings and decided to unite their destinies. Their parents could but rejoice over a decision which was reached quite spontaneously, *en toute spontanéité*."

This incident enlightens us on King Albert's conception of modern kingship. The old dogma of divine right bound the Sovereigns entirely to subordinate their personality to the State which they embodied. Their almost absolute power made them the prisoners of diplomatic arrangements and they lost, in private life, the initiative which was so freely granted them in public affairs. Leopold I, in spite of his respect for the Constitution, was far too much influenced by the ideas of the old régime to give up this age-long tradition; in his own marriage and in that of his

eldest son, he followed diplomatic usage. It is worthy of notice that King Albert, as a democratic Sovereign who not only respected, but had a sincere belief in Constitutionalism, freed himself and his family from the shackles of convention. He considered that if the Monarch was to be the "first citizen of the nation," he should at least enjoy, in his private life, the same rights as the humblest of his subjects. Among these rights none was more sacred than the choice of a wife. He had chosen freely himself and, when his son followed his example, he wished to show that it was with his full approval.

The formula of Louis XIV: *L'Etat, c'est moi* was superseded. But if the State became partly independent of the Sovereign, the latter should also enjoy some independence; he should share with others the privilege of leading a private life distinct from public affairs.

(3) It is not so easy, however, for a Sovereign to exert his personal freedom as for an ordinary citizen. He finds himself constantly hampered by etiquette, publicity and public curiosity. King Albert who so scrupulously respected the liberty of others, had some difficulty in asserting his own. If his privacy was respected at Laeken or at Ciergnon, his holidays were constantly curtailed by exacting public duties, and he could seldom mix in a crowd without attracting attention. He was essentially sociable and loved to come into contact with strangers without feeling the constant constraint of convention. Hence his use of incognito, sometimes in remote districts of Belgium, but more often in countries where he was not so well known. He occasionally took short trips with the Queen to the French Capital: "I love Paris," he confessed to M. Dumont-Wilden, "first of all, because it is a beautiful city, but also because I can pass unnoticed there. My wife and I like to go to the cinema, but in Brussels we can seldom do so because we are too well known. In Paris, we visit all the cinemas of the boulevards and sometimes forget to dine."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dumont-Wilden, *op. cit.*



11 King Albert and Queen Elisabeth in the Garden of Olives  
(Jerusalem, 1955.)

Men of his knowledge and attainments usually assume a contemptuous attitude towards popular spectacles and literature. From the time of his first journey to the States, King Albert had preserved a taste for American fiction, and was not ashamed to admit it. He showed a still greater weakness for the cinema. He felt particularly happy when he settled comfortably in his seat, in a boyish expectant mood. One day, accompanied by Comte de Grunne, he attended no less than five films. The last happened to be particularly thrilling and the Count remarked, on leaving the hall: "It is extraordinary how one can be moved by such stories."—"If we were not, we should not come here," the King answered, laughing. Merely to live with the crowd was delightful, to be lost in a seething humanity, to be, for a few hours, unknown and unnoticed and share openly, without any restraint, the feelings of those who surrounded him. He felt secure when the lights were out.

In these moments of relaxation he resented any intrusion. On one of his Paris visits, he was stopped by a journalist while strolling through the Bois de Boulogne: "You ought not to interrupt my short walk," objected the King, "I am your guest here." And, as the pressman persisted, he went on: "I like to mix with the Paris crowd. I always ask your Government not to have me followed. Allow me to be a simple citizen to-day. I ask you not to recognize me."<sup>1</sup>

All through his life he tried to avoid recognition. People saw him walking through London, Rome, Stockholm and other great cities, wearing old-fashioned clothes and most unbecoming hats. He almost overdid the part of the "simple citizen," striding buoyantly as if engaged on some urgent business. In Belgium, he used with advantage the motorist disguise, and in Switzerland he appeared in mountaineering kit as soon as he had reached his destination. He played hide-and-seek with publicity and enjoyed nothing more than being treated as an ordinary traveller. He had

<sup>1</sup> De Paeuw: *Albert, Troisième Roi des Belges*, p. 151.

an insatiable interest in human nature, and knowing that his experiences would lose all zest once his identity was revealed, he kept up his pretence even at the cost of some discomfort. When travelling with the Queen, he frequently assumed the name of his old servant. They liked to pass as "Monsieur and Madame Van Dyck." One of his pilots tells us how, after the War, the King introduced himself at a Deauville hotel under the name of Comte de Rethy. The place was full, and the only room available was a garret. As the porter was taking "Comte de Rethy" upstairs to his dismal quarters, his companion, in order to obtain a bed for himself, was forced to confess that he was the King's pilot. "What King?"—"The King of the Belgians."—"Where is he?" The man pointed to the lift in which the Sovereign had already disappeared. There was a rush on the stairs and the manager just succeeded in stopping his royal guest on the threshold of the garret. Needless to say, the King slept in state on the first floor, but he did not hide his disappointment that his identity had been revealed.

Once led into an adventure through his incognito, he pursued it to the end. In the country, he drove in an ordinary car, and there are scores of stories in which he is shown acting as a true knight of the road and helping fellow-travellers out of difficulties. On one occasion, in the Ardennes, he was stopped by a motorist who could not manage to restart his engine. As soon as the King stepped from his car, he was recognized. "Ah, Sire," exclaimed the traveller, "I did not know—please excuse me."—"Don't apologize, what is the matter?"—"I don't know, I believe it is the carburettor."—"Well, we shall see."

Helped by his chauffeur, the King proceeded to take the carburettor to pieces, examining it and repairing it like a trained engineer. The damage was more serious than appeared at first, a number of parts had to be tested, unscrewed and screwed up again. The weather was very hot. When he had finished, the King said, wiping his brow: "This is thirsty work."—"Sire, if I dared, I have here a

half-bottle of champagne.” The Sovereign readily accepted and might have been seen by any passer-by, with his chauffeur and an unknown man, all three in their shirt-sleeves, drinking in turn from one thermos mug.

While King Albert wished to preserve his incognito, he was much amused when those who detected his identity informed him of the fact with tact and humour. Once, as he was sharing a meal with his guides in a hut in the Tyrol, a new-comer remarked: “You look remarkably like the King of the Belgians”—“You are not the first to tell me that,” he answered, “this likeness has already caused me serious inconvenience.” During his first alpine experiences with M. Lefébure, he was advised by the guide not to proceed any further and, being unwilling to deprive his companion of the pleasure of completing the ascent, decided to wait for him. While he was pacing up and down to keep himself warm, another party arrived and the King handed on to them the advice he had been given. “One kind deed deserves another,” answered one of the climbers, “I advise you, sir, never to go to Belgium. Your likeness to King Albert is truly amazing.”

The French had given his name to a summit in Savoy, the *Pic Albert Ier*. Journeying in the neighbourhood, under the name of M. Durand, he asked his guide to point out to him the various mountains which surrounded them. As the guide purposely did not mention *Pic Albert Ier*, the King, in order to know whether he was recognized, asked its name. “Oh, that one,” replied the man, “is called *Pic Durand*.” The King’s pleasure still increased when his imperturbable companion continued to call him M. Durand.

In some cases, the Sovereign was induced to drop his disguise. He used to relate how, during his journey to America, he was one day pacing the platform of a small railway station in the Sierra Nevada beside his Pullman car, when he was accosted by a miner who said: “I should like to see King Albert.”—“My friend,” he replied, “I

think it will be difficult, they say he always gets up very late."—"What a pity," replied the man, "I got up at two o'clock this morning and walked five hours only to have a look at him." Wishing to give satisfaction to this enthusiast, the Sovereign revealed his identity. The miner, however, would not believe him. Looking him up and down, he remarked: "You, the King? Never! You have no crown!"<sup>1</sup>

#### (D) *Character*

The personal character of King Albert will remain a puzzle to modern psychologists in search of subtleties. It is founded on a few simple principles, formed by education and a strict conscience, and strengthened by an almost abnormal power of self-control. In everything he did and everything he said, we find a perfect truthfulness, a strong sense of duty and an indomitable energy. Sincere in his purpose, he did not hesitate to pursue it, and did not allow obstacles to alter his determination. This design is straightforward enough, and its very normality may appear almost unreal. Psycho-analysts may comfort themselves with the thought that behind this external image, a number of subconscious motives were at work. But the biographer must be contented with facts and is obliged to acknowledge even the wonder of simplicity when it confronts him with overwhelming evidence. Whether such inner motives existed or not, they never showed themselves. A man's character is not only what it is, it is also what he wills it to be, and the constant practice of will-power shapes his nature, as well as the external influences to which he is submitted.

(1) Sincerity first. The Countess of Flanders once said, "Albert has never lied," and this has been confirmed by several teachers who were in charge of the young Prince. He had no doubt other qualities, both good and bad, but his absolute truthfulness was from an early day his dominant

<sup>1</sup> P. Goemaere: *Albert Ten Jaar Aan de Rondte*.

characteristic. It resisted unimpaired the strain of public life and the temptations of opportunism. The King is reported to have said, during the War, to his ministers in Council: "We are surrounded with intrigues. The only thing left to Belgium is her honesty, let us keep it intact."<sup>1</sup> We can discover no occasion on which he compromised with his conscience. He may have been mistaken in some of his decisions, but he never took a decision which he did not sincerely believe to be just as well as wise. As Cardinal Mercier expressed it, he was the type of the honest man. In spite of his indulgence, he did not forgive those who attempted to deceive him or impose upon him. Once lost, his confidence could never be regained.

Duty next. It is doubtful whether he experienced any satisfaction at becoming heir to the throne, and he seems at first to have been reluctant to assume more responsibility than was strictly necessary. Kingship was a duty rather than a privilege, but as he exercised it and realized the results achieved, he became more and more absorbed by it. Unfortunately kingship implied the monotonous round of ceremonies to which he could never reconcile himself.

The Belgians love to see in their Princes a mixture of familiarity and majesty, a blend of good fellowship and pomp and circumstance. They like to feel that their Sovereign is not too proud to mix with them, but rejoice also to see him playing his part in those national pageants so popular since the days of Philip the Good and Charles V.

Leopold I and Leopold II, during the first part of his reign, had given satisfaction to this craving for ceremony, but, on the other hand, had remained rather distant in their relations with their subjects. King Albert did not share their attitude but felt, on the contrary, an instinctive dislike for etiquette and the artificiality of public receptions. He sympathized, nevertheless, with his people's contradictory claims on royalty, coming among them whenever he could, and submitting to the ordeal of public engagements

<sup>1</sup> See p. 283.

with inexhaustible patience. It was part of the "king's trade" and duty; he fulfilled it conscientiously, but could not always hide his weariness, especially when he had to listen to endless speeches. He felt that his time was wasted and longed for his books or some real relaxation among natural surroundings. This personal inclination was not, however, allowed to influence the normal course of public functions which were never so frequent as during the last years of his reign.

The King's dislike of ceremony was partly due to his retiring temperament and distaste for artificiality, and partly to the idea that the two things requested of him were difficult to reconcile. He had, at the same time, to preserve his prestige, as head of the State, and to come into close contact with his humblest subjects. While staying in the Luenga mission, during his last journey to the Congo, he asked specially to share the Brothers' meal and explained that what pleased him in the life of the community was that he felt "at home" amongst them: "When I arrive at one of our posts," he added, "they choose the best house for me and place two or three sentries at the door, and there I am . . . cut off from the rest."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his life, he resented any restriction on his freedom of movements. "I am delighted to see you," he declared to the officer commanding his escort during his first visit to the Colony, "but I hope that I shall never see your soldiers." Every measure for his safety had to be taken unobtrusively.

(2) He felt keenly the isolation of kingship. His happiest hours were spent among his family and a few chosen friends, or when he could manage to get into touch with his people. It was not duty alone which called him among his soldiers in the trenches, and which prompted him, in peace time, to hasten to any district afflicted by some calamity. In these moments he could be familiar without loss of dignity. He

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Leclercq, *op. cit.*

felt that his presence was both useful and beneficent; he knew how to encourage and comfort those who surrounded him. He was no longer alone.

One of the difficulties of the biographer who studies the life of a king, or for the matter of that, of any public man, is to draw the line between those things which belong to his true nature and those which he did or said because they suited the part which he wished to play. If the world is a stage, monarchs are the principal actors, and some of them, like "Good Queen Bess," for instance, and *Le Roi Soleil*, took their parts so seriously that their personalities seem almost merged into them. Others, like Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I, are torn between their own tastes and passions and the responsibilities of State. If a portrait of King Albert were to be hung in a picture gallery of crowned heads, it should be placed at the opposite end from that of Louis XIV, for he was the most human king that ever lived, and remained himself through all the functions at which he appeared. He never attempted to impress the public. His very naturalness and shy simplicity was more intimidating to some of his admirers than any assumed attitude. It is not so confusing to obtrude upon a great man who is well prepared to receive you, as to approach one who seems almost as embarrassed as yourself.

Since he did not play the part, he did not like to dress for it. In post-War years, for State functions, he always adopted the simple uniform of a Belgian general. When officers were allowed to wear a smarter full dress than the khaki, he did not adopt it, wishing to remain faithful to the uniform of the Yser; and since the officers of his household had to follow his example, they were not dressed as well as their colleagues. It seemed as if, by neglecting his clothes, he wished to take revenge upon the obsession of etiquette. "I remember seeing him," writes M. Pierre Daye, "half an hour after he had crossed Brussels in the State coach, at the side of the King of Spain. He was still covered with decorations, chains and ribbons, which, as he said laughing,

'encumbered' him. But the next time I met him, he wore a travelling suit of thick tweed with an ugly little ready-made tie . . . he seemed much happier."

(3) King Albert was unquestionably one of the most courageous men of his time, both physically and morally. It would be almost impudent at this stage to insist on this feature of his personality. He believed strongly in the interdependence of body and soul. Courage was not necessarily an inherited virtue; it had to be trained and, since life could not always afford circumstances favourable to this training, sports and exercise had to be practised, not so much for themselves as for the qualities which they developed. People said that King Albert did not know fear. This is scarcely to be believed in a man of such acute sensibility. But, if he knew fear, he knew also how to master it, and there is no doubt that he took a certain delight in doing so. He was by no means foolhardy, but when the War afforded him excellent reasons for taking risks, in order to encourage his soldiers, he made the most of his opportunities. The same remark applies to his flying experiences, especially during the months which followed the Armistice.

One of his pilots, M. Crombez, records how, flying from Brussels to Namur, he was compelled to operate a forced landing in a ploughed field, owing to a sudden stoppage of the engine. This caused anxiety in Brussels, as it took some time to telephone to the Palace to explain the delay. After examination, it was discovered that the royal passenger had inadvertently broken the contact of the magneto. A few days later, the Sovereigns were flying to London in separate planes. Before their departure, the King inspected the machine in which the Queen was to fly, and inquired, smiling, "if there were any contacts which might be broken" in her aeroplane.

A far more serious accident which might have proved fatal occurred to M. Crombez, some months later, on his return from Calais. When he reached Brussels and wished

to come down from an altitude of 3000 feet, he noticed that his control no longer worked and that he could not right himself. He nose-dived with his motor full on and succeeded just in time in straightening the machine. He was very much shaken by the experience and the King must have noticed it, but he never made any inquiries, only saying: "You dived rather sharply this time." It was found afterwards that the control rod had become disconnected, having slipped out of its bolt.<sup>1</sup>

Another narrow escape occurred when M. Stampe, while piloting the King across the Channel, encountered a violent squall. The pilot, blinded by rain and darkness, lost all sense of his position and had to come down close to the sea before regaining it. Happily the motor did not fail, this time.

One at least of the Sovereign's Alpine experiences ought to be mentioned here. The story was published in February 1934 in the *Popolo d'Italia* and reproduced in the Belgian Press.

The King was engaged, in September 1930, in ascending with several Belgian alpinists, one of the summits of the Brenta. They were climbing a steep chimney, the King being roped with the guide who preceded him, and followed by his companions. When they had reached a height of about 100 feet, they were stopped by a large rock which obstructed the chimney. The guide succeeded in surmounting the obstacle and reaching a small platform, but the King leaned too heavily on the block of stone, which became loose and threatened in its fall to strike those who followed. Pressing with all his might against the cliff, he succeeded, with the help of one of his companions, in maintaining the block in its place until everybody had reached a safe position. Then only did he allow the rock to crash down the chimney, calmly resuming the ascent until the summit was reached. Later, he made a joke of the incident which he called a "risk of the trade," "*un risque du métier.*"

<sup>1</sup> *Pages de Gloire* (Desclée, De Brouwer, 1934).

To those who urged him to be more careful, King Albert always answered that he took "all necessary precautions," but that he needed violent exercise after his sedentary work. He sometimes added: "Do you think that so much trouble should be taken in order to be sure to die in one's bed? Think of the tragedy of the death-bed." Sickness would become more and more threatening with the passing of years. Between the risk of a sudden accidental death and that of failing health owing to lack of exercise, he chose the first alternative. But moral values were not forgotten; sport was to the last the school of energy.

This energy was needed as much in after-War politics as on the battlefield, and the fact that the King remained a convinced constitutionalist did not render it less necessary. There is no stronger delusion than the popular belief that a constitutional sovereign, pursuing his work conscientiously, has an easier task than a popular dictator. The practice of parliamentary institutions requires powers of patience and persuasion which may make a larger claim on a leader's strength than any *coup d'état*, and the long work of reconstruction, with its setbacks and disappointments, was enough in itself to wear out the most sturdy nature. Ministers came and went, but the King remained at his post, and it was uphill work all the way. First came the ordeal of restoration, later there were financial obstacles, and these had scarcely been overcome when Belgium was engulfed in the world depression and the scheme of international politics began to deteriorate, leading to new armaments threatening once more the country's independence. No wonder that some relaxation was needed and the refuge of sport and nature sought more and more eagerly.

(4) One feels on safe ground when speaking of King Albert's goodness, for sentimentality was as foreign to him as insincerity, no doubt for the same reason: they were both incompatible with moral courage. But clarity, in the fine old meaning of the word, was nevertheless one of his out-

standing qualities and the ultimate aim of his existence. If he struggled so hard for the maintenance of national and international law, it was because he found in Justice the sole means of stemming the excesses of force and cruelty. If he wished to protect the working-classes against the abuses of capitalism and the natives against the dangers of colonization, it was because he believed that no modern civilized society could be built at the expense of any class or any race. His sympathy was as wide as his range of learning, and he encouraged science, art and literature because he found in intellectual development an inexhaustible source of prosperity and happiness. Goodness itself depended on material and spiritual progress. All the roads he followed reached the same goal.

High moral aspirations do not necessarily imply personal kindness in the small affairs of life, and self-righteousness is often associated with a certain hardness, especially among people who are accustomed to exercise authority. King Albert possessed a particularly lovable and congenial nature. His consideration for all those who approached him, more particularly those who depended upon him, is revealed in a thousand actions which it is obviously impossible to record.

When, in Brussels, he planned an early excursion, he refused to have his household servants called up, and, with his faithful Van Dyck, himself prepared his breakfast.

Once, in the Congo, he mislaid his cigars, and suspicion fell on the negro boys. The King refused to have any inquiry made and declared the next day: "I have found my cigars, they were in my coat pocket," adding not without a touch of irony: "Once more the natives have been wrongly suspected."

Hearing that the wife of one of his secretaries had sent a message that her husband was ill, he came himself to the telephone. "See that your husband looks after himself," he advised; then, after some hesitation: "Don't imagine that I want him to get better in order to resume his work. I speak in his own interest, for he is my friend." Whenever such news reached him, he had inquiries made and wished

to be correctly informed of their result. As this had been neglected once, he remarked: "You seem to think that I do this as a mere formality, but it is not so. I wish to know how my friends are getting on."

He showed as much sympathy for the victims of accidents as for his wounded soldiers; here again his Queen was always at his side. To some he sent his doctor, to others medicines or a gift of money, after making personal inquiries in each case as to what was most needed. One day, when he was obliged to leave the coal pit where a disaster had occurred, to go to a neighbouring hospital, he asked one of his attendants to stay behind, instructing him to take the names of the last wounded who had not yet been brought to the surface, in order that they should receive the same attention.

He was particularly kind to children and old people. One of his teachers who had reached a great age, had retired to a cottage near Brussels. The King found time to call on him regularly until his death and made a point of attending his funeral. A veteran of 1830, living in a remote village, had reached the venerable age of 102. As he expressed the desire to see his Sovereign before he died, the King drove all the way to Feluy-Arquennes, in order to satisfy the old patriot's last wish.

His readiness to take time and trouble to help those in difficulties on the road, has already been mentioned. He once found a cyclist in despair, unable to start her motor and had to go to the next village, seven miles away, to fetch some tools before succeeding in completing the repair. This time, the incognito was preserved, and the story would never have been heard of if the King, passing the same spot the next day, had not laughingly told one of his companions that, a few hours before, people might have surprised him there, kneeling at the feet of a woman.

He did not shrink from the sight of suffering if he could in any way alleviate it, but disliked seeing it inflicted, even upon animals. He did not like hunting, neither did he care to witness horse-racing. Bullfighting was so repugnant to

him that, on the occasion of his visit to Madrid, he specially asked that no bullfights should be organized in his honour.

His charities and his gifts to scientific institutions were his greatest luxury. After the War, he refused for a long time to have his civil list raised as all other State salaries were, according to the new index of living. He was receiving 3,300,000 francs, one-third of which was absorbed by the pensions given to the old servants of the household. There remained only from £10,000 to £15,000 to cover running expenses, and the Sovereign was compelled to make frequent inroads into his private capital. The sums spent in this way, during the ten years which followed the War, are estimated at forty-six to fifty million francs.

Such examples of disinterestedness and warm-hearted sympathy for suffering are not unique, but a king is subjected to many demands during a prolonged national crisis, and when he wishes to answer all those which appear to him justified, he is obliged to carry an ever-increasing load of responsibilities.

Like most royalties, he had many Christian names: Albert - Leopold - Clément - Marie - Meinrad. Now, Saint Meinrad was supposed to be a member of the Hohenzollern family who, after founding the monastery of Einsiedlen in the ninth century, lived for a long time as a hermit in the company of two ravens and a squirrel. His namesake led a very different life, but remained nevertheless fond of solitude, an ardent admirer of monastic and missionary discipline, simple in his habits and frugal in his diet. His devotion to his people had developed into a passion for self-sacrifice. He shared the Saint's untiring patience and courage, with his delicate and almost feminine sympathy not for men only, but for beasts and even for trees.

A lady who gave him hospitality for several days during the War, noticed a small Prayer Book which she found always open at the side of his table, and remarked that he read a few pages every day. "The Imitation of Christ" was ever at his bedside.

(5) If we endeavour to study King Albert's character, we are struck by its wealth and manysidedness, but also by the stern economy with which these resources were used. The world is encumbered with virtuous people who have no passions to control and passionate people too weak to master their impulses. King Albert, once more, appears as a perfectly well-balanced type. Gifted with a rich and sensitive nature, a great strength of purpose and a keen intellect, he possessed even to a higher degree this power of control which Christians call "Grace" and some modern philosophers "higher will," and which allowed him to preserve to the end his innate spiritual humility.

Many great men have lost humility either by endowing their natural passions with moral virtue, like the romantics, or by subordinating everything to human reason like the eighteenth century rationalists, or again by believing that ultimate happiness may be found in material progress, like the nineteenth century materialists. The modern school of humanists believe that these various tendencies can only be brought into harmony if they are subordinated to a supernatural will which they recognize as a fact, without attempting to define its origin.

When the King spoke of Grace as the "power which gives peace and supreme happiness," he was aware of the theological meaning of the word, but he only used this expression when addressing those who shared his faith; to others and to the general public, he spoke of "goodness," or more frequently of "moral values," which were, for him, the ultimate aim of any material, social, scientific or artistic development. As a man, he found in the doctrine of Grace the support and comfort which he needed. As the King of a nation which included millions of agnostics, he spoke in more general terms, trusting that the virtue in which he believed existed also among those who were not conscious of it, or even denied it.

He had met in all quarters and parties a great deal of devotion and selfishness, loyalty and hypocrisy. Some

of his biographers speak of his "scepticism" and quote certain remarks in which they recognize the ironical wit of Leopold II, but if King Albert was ever sceptical, his doubts did not affect men as individuals, but rather the importance of the narrow categories into which they were divided. His scientific training prompted him to react against religious or political fanaticism. He would no doubt have endorsed the words of his great friend, Cardinal Mercier: "Revelation is not a motive of assent, a direct source of knowledge for the scientist and the philosopher, but rather a safeguard and negative standard. The Church does not positively teach either science or philosophy."

#### (E) *Constitutionalism*

"The real peak of Albert I's achievement," wrote R. C. K. Ensor, "was that he was the best constitutional monarch who has ever reigned on the Continent of Europe." The appreciation shows a clear understanding of the King's attitude. He did not wish his military achievements to be belittled, because he was proud of his soldiers and desired to maintain his country's prestige, but throughout his life, the General in him was subordinated to the Statesman. He said once that he had been "cornered into heroism"; he might have added that he was forced to fight in defence of his political principles. It was because his country had assumed international responsibilities and because the Constitution entrusted him with the leadership of the army that he led his soldiers against the invader, and for no other reason. When all is said the War was only a tragic interlude in his life, and he exerted the greatest part of his energy in guiding his country through the shoals of material and political reconstruction. His two greatest successes were perhaps the Battle of the Yser, and his Armistice Speech in Parliament, which was greeted with equal enthusiasm by all parties.

(1) The manner in which he won the support of the Socialists has already been explained,<sup>1</sup> but requires further illustration.

In December 1909, on the eve of the King's accession, the Council of the Socialist Party published the following manifesto: "Albert I will govern like his uncle with the support of the banks, the big industries and commercial houses. He will not be able to govern without them, and, if he wished to separate himself from them, he would be broken. . . . He will necessarily be the tool of those who enrich themselves through the work of the labourers by oppressing them. Between Socialism and Monarchy there is no possible reconciliation, and when official Belgium prepares itself to acclaim Albert I . . . a loud clamour of hope and defiance will rise from all the workers' breasts: *Vive la République Sociale!*"

Some individual labour leaders had already been impressed by the interest shown by the heir to the throne in social problems and his sympathy for the workers' condition, but, officially, the party remained deliberately hostile and identified royal with capitalistic interests. To realize the change of heart which the Sovereign effected during his reign, the declaration of 1909 must be compared with an article published by M. Vandervelde in the same paper, *Le Peuple*, of February 19th 1934: "On hearing of this new tragedy I feel deeply affected both as a private individual and as a politician. In this capacity I realize the infinite gravity, for the country, of this sudden loss at a moment when, more than ever, the principles of liberty and democracy inscribed in the Belgian Constitution need to be defended. Those who, less in Belgium than abroad, have reproached us with the betrayal of our republican principles in becoming, in agreement with our party, 'the King's ministers,' simply proved that they knew nothing of the personality of the first citizen of Belgium and of the country's institutions. King Albert was the ideal incarnation of this

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 76, 322-325.

'Republican Monarchy' which the authors of our Constitution wished deliberately to create in 1831."

M. Vandervelde explained further how he had met the King for the first time on August 4th 1914; how he had been called by him to his Headquarters after the Battle of the Yser and asked to speak to his men; how, from that time, the King had wished to extend the franchise to all citizens, including the soldiers who had so bravely fought for their country, and how he had realized this project at Lophem.

"Shall I speak," he added, "of the King's relations with the Socialist Ministers? Scrupulously anxious not to do anything which might look, in the faintest degree, like an attempt to exercise personal power, he wielded, through his advice, an influence which never ceased to grow with the passing of years. . . . The blind stupidity of fate deprives the country of a good servant—to be this was always his main purpose—of a great citizen, of a brave and wise man who held Peace—a Peace just for all—as the greatest good. When King Albert, in 1918, re-entered Brussels, he passed on his way the *Maison du Peuple* (the Socialist Headquarters) where, owing to the death of one of our friends, the red flag was flying at half mast. He saluted the red flag. To-morrow the Labour Party, Republican and Socialist, will respectfully lower its flag in honour of his memory."

In order to understand the importance of this change of attitude, it is necessary to remember that the traditions of Belgian Socialism are very different from those of the British Labour Party. The latter started as a purely economic movement and only entered politics at a later date. The former, though based on Trade Unionism and Co-operation, was founded in 1885 as a revolutionary and republican movement, and was influenced in its growth not only by Marxist economic doctrines, but also by French political republicanism. In order to reconcile themselves with the Monarchy, the Belgian Socialists were, therefore, obliged to break away, if not in theory, at least in practice, from one of the chief articles of their programme, and

expose themselves to the attacks of their own extremists who inclined to Communism.

That the King, who was denounced in 1909 as being the supporter or "tool" of a greedy Capitalism, should have been looked upon, twenty-five years later, as the champion of democratic institutions, the preserver of Parliament, and the apostle of social justice, is perhaps the most sweeping victory ever won by a Constitutional Monarch. No doubt the crisis of the War, by exalting Belgian patriotism, helped him to bring together all parties for the defence of common interests, but on the other hand the economic and financial trouble which followed rendered this co-operation more difficult. Political union, it is true, was not maintained for long, but the conflicts between Capital and Labour never reached, in post-War years, their former bitterness and, what is far more important, the Monarch was placed once and for all outside and above political parties and class prejudice. He represented the whole nation, and his disinterestedness was above suspicion. Far from suffering from the introduction of general suffrage, his prestige was incomparably increased, owing to the supreme position he occupied in the State as the acknowledged arbitrator not only between two, but between three parties, not only of the differences dividing one social class, but of those which divided or which might divide the whole population.<sup>1</sup>

(2) In his speech of November 1918, King Albert had already dwelt on the necessary co-operation of Capital and Labour. He further developed this theme in his Centenary speeches, dwelling on the interdependence of "all workers." In economic as in linguistic questions, he always maintained that "reasons for union" were far more important than "reasons for disunion." Such arguments had already been heard in the past and had appeared rather suspect to Socialists, because they were frequently used in order to persuade them to sacrifice their own interests not so much

<sup>1</sup> See p. 525.

to the country as a whole as to their employers. When King Albert expressed these views, no doubt remained of his sincerity.

If the study of his relations with Socialism were pursued in detail, it could be shown that his success was not so much due to the soundness of his arguments as to the personal confidence he inspired. It was more and more realized that his interest in labour conditions was of a practical nature and that he was by no means satisfied with the pre-War régime. He shared with his adviser, Professor Waxweiler, the opinion that the workers could and should be given a larger share in the profits accruing from their work. He sympathized with the ideas of M. Solvay, the founder of the *Institut Sociologique*, who, having himself risen from the bottom to the highest rung of the ladder, urged the interference of the State to attenuate social distinctions by providing "equality of chances."<sup>1</sup> He openly acknowledged the abuses of Capitalism, and deplored the lack of comfort and the hardships which so many workmen had to endure. He believed in the development of night schools and recreation centres. In 1911, while visiting one of these in Brussels, he declared that "those who are at work most of the day must find centres of education and recreation. It is one of the best means of developing the productive and moral energies of the nation." He supported for the same reason private and public schemes for the improvement of housing conditions. "How many times," he declared, "do I not deplore, while crossing some industrial district, their lack of comfort, of light and open spaces. Yes, there is still a great deal to be done in order to provide for our workmen's families bright and healthy surroundings."

He returned to his favourite theme in his Armistice Speech, insisting on the necessity of "ensuring to the working classes the material conditions necessary to their physical, moral and intellectual progress."

Shortly afterwards, a strike threatened the metal

<sup>1</sup> See p. 63.

industries, and the Prime Minister could not bring the parties together, the employers refusing to grant the eight hours' day claimed by the workers. The King summoned to the palace the representatives of the Unions and of the Employers' Federation. He succeeded in removing the prejudices existing against a shorter day, saying that from his own experience he had noticed that its application did not appreciably reduce production. When, in June 1921, Parliament adopted the reform, according to the recommendation of the League of Nations, he wrote to his Socialist Minister, M. Joseph Wauters, expressing the wish that the measure should be faithfully applied: "The eight hours' day has been legally conquered. It has still to be conquered economically."

His interest in technical education prompted him, in 1929, to visit all the most important professional schools in the country. The next year, he received the representatives of the "Young Catholic Workers" and inquired from their president whether he was satisfied with the results of his efforts to encourage professional pride and conscientiousness: "You must certainly," he said, "encounter a certain opposition, for there is still a great deal of bitterness among the workers following the abuses from which they have suffered."<sup>1</sup>

Already on the day of his Accession, the King had appealed for the support of all men of goodwill. He seemed particularly grateful to the Labour leaders who had overcome their prejudice in order to lend their services to the State. On the death of M. Wauters, who had been for five years minister of Labour, after the Armistice, he wrote to his widow a letter in which he said that "the deceased Minister had placed at the service of the State the resources of an exceptional intelligence and of a remarkable capacity for work. He showed, notably during the difficult period of stabilization, the same patriotism of which he had already given many proofs during the German occupation."

In 1925, M. Bertrand, one of the founders of the Party,

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Leclercq, *op. cit.*

who was retiring from politics at the age of seventy, heard that the King intended to confer upon him the high distinction of the *Grand Cordon de l'Ordre de Léopold*. Since some ex-Prime Ministers had not received this decoration, the news seemed scarcely credible; it was nevertheless confirmed. The old Socialist leader called on the King to thank him, but the latter said, tapping him on the shoulder: "You have well deserved it in defending for half a century this vital force of the nation—the working class." M. Bertrand was nonplussed. He thought that he had merely been honoured as an old member of Parliament; he now saw that his championship of labour interests had won him the King's sympathy.

Another instance of the Sovereign's good relations with Socialist leaders is well worth recording. When, in 1917, M. Camille Huysmans, secretary of the second International, decided to attend the conference of Stockholm held under the chairmanship of M. Branting, he was accused of betraying the national cause by meeting enemy delegates. After the War, many of his compatriots, even in his own party, could not forgive him for taking a share in this effort to hasten a peace settlement. They were considerably surprised when they noticed that the King himself gave several proofs of his regard and sympathy for the "man of Stockholm." It has only recently been made known that the Sovereign was informed at the time of M. Huysmans' initiative, and never doubted his loyalty. He wished to dissociate himself from the unfair attacks directed against him.<sup>1</sup>

King Albert's impartiality allowed him to discriminate between the constructive and destructive side of Socialism. As a builder and preserver, he was opposed to the doctrine of class war and Marxist materialism, but he realized at the same time that there were, among the labour leaders, a number of generous men devoting their lives to the working people. He took the first step towards them, and they responded all the more readily because they felt that he

<sup>1</sup> Denuit; *Albert, Roi des Belges*, p. 131.

was animated by the same ardent desire to raise the material and moral standard of the people which prompted their own efforts.

(3) The homage paid by M. Vandervelde to the King's scrupulous constitutionalism emphasizes the most striking feature of his public life. The same remarkable balance which shows itself in his intellectual interests and in his philosophy is revealed by the perfect harmony existing between his personality and the part which he played in national and international affairs. The epic of King Albert's career is the story of a simple and honest man conscious of his responsibilities, faithful to his engagements, sincere in his convictions and acting according to his principles, who was determined not to abate one jot of this honesty and sincerity when dealing with diplomacy and politics. To the cynic this may sound like a fairy-tale. It needed a great man to make it history. It explains the answer to the German ultimatum, the perfect rectitude of Belgian policy during the War, the era of reforms which followed the Armistice and the respect for parliamentary institutions, at a time when they were attacked by dictatorships from the Right and from the Left.

The King felt some impatience when he heard the easy criticism aimed at the representatives of the nation. "You complain," he said to M. Nothomb, "of the lowering of the parliamentary standard. Are you sure of it? For me, many of these discussions which I follow attentively, seem substantial, alive and truly interesting. I have re-read the old reports of the debates in the Chamber and the Senate. These gentlemen, of the *censitaire* régime,<sup>1</sup> were sometimes boring. The tone of our discussions? It has always been freer than abroad. When in my young days our foreign cousins came to visit us in Brussels, they asked my parents how we could stand such violence of language. We astonished them by replying that these men who were so

<sup>1</sup> Before the 1893 revision

outspoken were also generally sincere, reasonable, honest and kind-hearted."

At the time when dictatorships had been established in Italy and Spain, he was somewhat puzzled by the peculiar position in which the monarchs of these countries had been placed. If faithfulness to the Constitution implied a scrupulous respect for the parliamentary régime, the monarch might infringe it not only by abusing personal authority, but also by allowing anyone else to do so. He confessed to M. de Peauw: "I wondered how the Kings of Italy and Spain could justify before their conscience the establishment of a dictatorship in their kingdoms. I asked my *Chef de Cabinet* to study the question for my personal information. His conclusion was that by sanctioning the alterations brought about into his country's Constitution, the King of Italy had observed the forms prescribed for its revision, and could not therefore be incriminated on that account. This was unhappily not the case for King Alfonso." The remark is all the more significant that there was not the remotest possibility of a corresponding situation arising in Belgium, since the main criticisms directed against the Sovereign came from his warmest admirers who wished him to wield more power in the country than he did.

If the expression were not too familiar, one might say that King Albert was a stickler for legality. He had a curious way, when insisting on his respect for the law of the country, of detaching every syllable of the word which expressed his attitude "*Je suis un Roi con-sti-tu-tion-nel.*" This was so well known by his ministers that while talking to him they did not hesitate to dwell on this modern conception of kingship: "Sire," said M. Huysmans one day, "if we had ever to elect the President of a Republic, I should give you my vote." No wonder that King Albert was so popular in France and that on the morrow of his death a republican paper declared: "He was also our King."

The Belgian Constitution recognizes the complete freedom of worship. Although the immense majority of

believers are Roman Catholics, all Churches are placed on the same legal footing. When in November 1922, the heads of the different Churches blessed the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, the Royal Family left, owing to some mistake in the arrangements, immediately after the blessing had been given by the Archbishop of Malines. As soon as he realized his omission, the same afternoon, the King conveyed his apologies to the President of the Evangelical Synod and to the Great Rabbi.

The letter which he sent to Comte de Broqueville, in January 1934, to prevent a Government crisis is another case in point.<sup>1</sup> It enclosed a detailed memorandum on the proper solution to be given to the difficulties caused by the projected reinstatement of some civil servants who had been penalized in 1919. The rumour had spread that the Ministers had already taken some decision on the subject. Discreetly but firmly, the King reminded them that they could not do so without his consent: "If the Ministers in Council have already examined the report of the Commission, they have not and could not act according to its conclusions. Our political organization only gives the Ministers in Council the right to take decisions valid in Law, in very exceptional cases (Article 79 of the Constitution and 14 of the Organic Law concerning the *Cour des Comptes*). In other circumstances, the discussions of the Ministers in Council are only exchanges of views regarding the co-ordination of the work of the various departments, or agreements on principle on political matters. As a certain confusion exists on this point in public opinion, it is perhaps opportune to restate the constitutional doctrine." He showed the same zeal in preserving the Crown's legal powers as in refraining from abusing them.

The Sovereign's conception of kingship may be summed up in the words he used the last time he received the members of the Brussels Court of Appeal: "The power which presents the greatest analogy with the Monarchy is

<sup>1</sup> See p. 372.

the Judicial Power. Like the King, the magistrates must exert their action above passions and parties."

King Albert's colonial policy was guided by similar principles. He wished to develop in the Congo legislative measures in order to improve the conditions of the natives. Before the Colonial Congress held in Brussels in December 1920, he recognized that, at the origin of modern colonization, the Mother Country had too often exclusively in view her own interests to which her dependencies were sacrificed: "It is a cause for congratulation to notice how much the progress of political and moral ideas and a more exact conception of the true interests of the two parties, have modified these methods." Ten years later, speaking at Antwerp, he expressed the wish that "the Colony herself and her native population should benefit in a larger proportion from the multiple advantages which European countries seek in these distant lands." Speaking to M. Tschoffen, in 1926, after the return of Prince Leopold from a prolonged inspection of the Colony, he remarked: "Yes, my son has been able to notice great and happy changes, but the situation of the natives is not sufficiently improved compared with what it was ten years ago." Two days before his death, he declared to the same minister: "Until now the natives have been asked to sell their labour, henceforth they must be able to sell the fruit of their labour. Everything depends on that."

(4) The historians of the future will dwell on Belgian dynastic tradition, and will, with reason, insist on the debt which King Albert owed to Leopold II and Leopold I. He was always ready to acknowledge it. There is nevertheless a great difference between his own achievements and those of his predecessors. Coming into power at a time when the country was ruled by a privileged class, the latter loyally accepted the Constitution of 1831 and succeeded, within its frame, in rendering the greatest services to the State in international and colonial affairs, and in maintaining at home

an even balance between the two leading parties. Their scope of action was nevertheless necessarily limited by the political outlook of the period. They were liberally minded, but considered that the exercise of the franchise required strong qualifications. They were not prepared to accept the democratic movement which swept over Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. This was made plain during the last years of the reign of Leopold II, when his views clashed with those of the popular leaders of the country.

King Albert was not only loyal to the principles of the Constitution, but believed in their logical development. He was no doubt anxious that the progress of education should coincide with the extension of the franchise, but when the moment appeared opportune he supported the reform. He did not believe blindly in the virtues of the masses, but neither did he believe in the innate qualities of any class or party. All developments were possible, always within the frame of the Constitution. Far from weakening the national charter, he thought that the extension of its principles would strengthen it. Democracy was, no doubt, a great experiment, but once attempted it must be carried through. The prestige of Law, which was the key-note of his political creed, would be increased if the rights it conferred and the obligations it imposed were extended to all. "It may be necessary," he wrote to one of his ministers, "to place oneself above certain preconceived ideas and even above certain interests so-called general—in order to be better prepared to foresee the exigencies of the future and to discern in the past that which reveals the qualities of duration and progress. Such is the task of true statesmen."<sup>1</sup>

His faith in constitutionalism and legality rested on his experience of human character. He did not share the wild optimism of the romantics about "natural man," neither did he agree with the cynical pessimism of those who declare that all national or international reforms are bound to fail because "human nature remains the same." Repressive

<sup>1</sup> Leclercq, p. 173.

laws are unavoidable as a curb on human passions and selfishness, but the exercise of liberty is as indispensable in the social body as that of freewill in the individual. It is the condition of dignity and honour and of that "free consent of all citizens which is the moral foundation of true social order." Humanism led towards a higher standard of public opinion which, in its turn, influenced the country's laws and institutions. The Constitution therefore must be amended from time to time and subjected to revision. It must be "adaptable" and "elastic" in order to support the nation without cramping its movements. Anarchy and autocracy are bound to fail because they are purely dogmatic and do not respect the moral freedom of the citizen. Constitutionalism alone offers a *via media*.

When, in May 1926, Belgium was faced with a financial debacle owing to the loss of credit and the depreciation of the franc,<sup>1</sup> King Albert wrote to his new Prime Minister, M. Jaspar, a letter which was published at the time. The crisis was not only financial, but also political. Parliament having been partially responsible for the trouble was violently attacked by the Conservatives and the extremists of the Left:

"I think it is useful," wrote the King, "to communicate to you certain reflections inspired by the events which the country has just experienced.

"The recent ministerial crisis is without precedent in our contemporary history. It has occurred owing to a great number of circumstances in which economic instability and the moral disturbances following the War have played the main part.

"In the confusion of public opinion, some people have feared that parliamentary groups would be unable to provide the Head of the State with the means of forming a Government according to the customary rule of our public law, invariably observed by my predecessors and by myself. Events have shown that they were wrong. Under pressure

<sup>1</sup> See p. 365.

of danger, the necessity of a patriotic union of all efforts to restore the financial position has soon been realized. The mass of the nation will also understand it, for I feel sure that the Government will at once assert, through wise measures, their will to dissipate false alarms and to reassure those whose worthy interests appear to be threatened. It is by these means that the Government will obtain the moral and material support indispensable for the fulfilment of its task. . . .

"The fundamental resources of the country remain intact. If confidence is restored . . . , if the Belgians apply themselves with tenacity to the development of production and trade, if they adapt courageously in public and in private life a régime of stern economies, the nation will soon resume her course on the way to progress and prosperity. But, in order to conquer the present peril, a truce must be called in all dissensions. Let us avoid all excesses, in writing and speaking, which can only sow germs of discord. Let us preserve our old reputation for good sense, moderation, wisdom and energy.

"Our institutions are sufficiently supple to allow the Government to use within their frame the means necessary to cure the evils from which we are suffering. Under a régime of free discussion, if public spirit remains healthy, if it does not wander in search of rash solutions, it is impossible that a practical agreement should not finally be reached between governors and governed on the best methods to save us from ruin."

The motive which prompted this message is obvious: the Royal adviser wished to restore public calm and confidence. His profession of faith in the adaptability of Belgian public law to this or any other crisis is nevertheless particularly striking. No drastic changes were needed and it would be enough for Parliament to grant exceptional powers to the Government for a short period to conquer this new obstacle. After the German invasion, the King had governed by decrees for four years. After the crash of the

franc, the same method was adopted for six months, but the Constitution remained unaltered. Normal conditions would be restored after the stabilization of the currency, as they had been restored after the liberation of the country. Looked upon in this light, kingship and parliamentary institutions supported each other instead of coming into conflict. The Power of the Crown was kept in reserve for great emergencies which could not be met through the ordinary methods of parliamentary government.

It is not within the scope of this book to deal with the ideas which inspire the present King of the Belgians or to point out the many points of contact which can already be discerned between his policy and that of his father. It is nevertheless striking to find, in the Accession Speech of Leopold III, the very words used by King Albert in his message to M. Jaspar. "The institutions given us by the authors of the Constitution," said the young King, "which have stood the test of over a century, are sufficiently broad and *sufficiently supple* to adapt themselves, within legal bounds, to the variable necessities of the times."

King Albert did not only succeed in elaborating a new conception of Constitutionalism, he handed it on to his successor, and founded a tradition.

(5) There are two types of reformers, those who, like Voltaire and Luther, denounced the abuses of their time and wished to transform the world from without, and those who, like Lincoln and St. Francis, while realizing these abuses, wished to improve the condition of mankind from within. The first felt impelled to break away from the community to which they belonged and spent most of their energy in destroying the religious or political régime which they had found defective. The second endeavoured to eliminate the parasites from the tree without lopping its branches, and, by so doing, increase its strength and growth. Both types may be needed, but history seems to show that the work of the second, though less spectacular, has generally

proved more fruitful than that of the first, too frequently followed by a series of wasteful reactions.

King Albert's methods were essentially constructive. When he talked, he used to move his hands as if, according to M. Janson's words, "he wished to build something." Of all his faculties the one which was the least developed was, perhaps, imagination. He did not visualize a new world devoid of all the imperfections of the past, and he lacked that proud, cocksureness which allows the destroyer to do his work so convincingly. He took things as he found them, considered them carefully for a long time—he said himself that "the Coburgs develop slowly"—discovered certain defects and certain qualities, eliminated the first, if compelled to do so, and devoted all his energy to developing the second.

He was not by nature combative, and only fought when his back was to the wall, as he did in 1914, with a kind of dogged and philosophic determination. Had he been "born an engineer," as he suggested, he might have built admirable roads and railways, but he would have preferred to follow the configuration of the landscape rather than to cut across valleys and mountains in a straight line. Being born the constitutional king of a small and neutral country, he accepted his position as a matter of course, although not inclined by temperament to the exercise of power, and still less to the outward show of ceremony. In his thoughtful way, he perceived the great services which he might render to the seven million people entrusted to him. When the blow fell, five years after his Accession, he was prepared for it, and the long fight of his life began, first against the invader, later against the material and moral wreckage wrought by the War. As the struggle developed, however, he became more and more immersed in his work and convinced of the crucial importance of the principles he was called upon to defend. His individual conception of morality was gradually linked up with his social conception of higher moral values, as expressed in international and civil law.

There came a moment when personal and political ideals merged into each other, giving him the comfort of certitude.

His views on the origin of the War and on the reasons which brought Belgium and Great Britain into the conflict never altered. They remained in 1933 what they had been in 1914. Instead of shaking his conviction in the righteousness of his cause, all the official documents and memoirs published year after year strengthened and confirmed it. He never tired of dwelling on these essential principles. "Belgium will never forget," he declared in July 1921, at Buckingham Palace, "that Great Britain threw herself unhesitatingly into the most tragic of all wars to enforce the respect of treaties and to maintain the integrity of my country." He repeated this pronouncement a year later when King George paid an official visit to Brussels: "Never has a greater lesson of honour and of respect for the treaties been given to the world." In July 1927, inaugurating the Menin Gate at Ypres, at a time when the principal issue of the War was already overshadowed in many minds by the disappointments of peace, he was still more emphatic: "It was to uphold the sanctity of treaties that England came into the War; it was to avenge an unjustifiable attack on Belgium that the British Empire took up arms even to the remotest part of its possessions; it was to hoist and hold high the drooping flag of civilization that legions of proud warriors came to Flanders determined to conquer or to die, at first in thousands, later in hundreds of thousands from England, Scotland, Ireland, from Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, from New Zealand, South Africa and India."

He did not live long enough to witness the triumph of the international régime which he had so stubbornly defended. Indeed, it seemed, during the last year of his reign, as if an adverse reaction had set in and as if the progress of the principles to which he was attached had received a severe check. But through all disappointments, he never lost faith in the soundness of his vision. The intellectual structure remained whole, rising from scientific

knowledge and artistic understanding to the conception of these moral values which should be the ultimate aim of all human effort and which, in their turn, through public opinion, influenced legislation and spread physical and spiritual comfort among the people.

He was more and more conscious of the harmony of his own world. The man, the humanist and the Constitutional King were one.

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Last Climb

(1) ALL great public tragedies awake the memory of a number of circumstances which may be interpreted as leading to them. It has been remarked that, towards the end of 1933, the future looked particularly dark for Belgium and Western Europe. The country was struggling among new financial difficulties provoked by the world economic crisis. It was already plain that the hopes founded on the Disarmament Conference would be disappointed. National Socialism dominated Germany and assumed a more and more aggressive attitude, while France was deeply disturbed by financial scandals. It has also been said that King Albert, with these anxieties weighing on his mind, complained on several occasions of the strain imposed upon him by sedentary work and insisted on the necessity of seeking in physical exercise the "moral liberation" which he badly needed. He had besides repeatedly declared to those who were warning him against the dangers he was running that the future of the dynasty was assured and that his son was now perfectly able to assume the responsibilities of State. He had no fear and "was quite ready." It seems almost as if he had had a premonition of his approaching end.

This conclusion must not, however, be adopted hastily. It is true that the situation was critical, but it had been even worse on several previous occasions, for instance, during the financial crisis of 1926. It is true also that the King's ministers and some of his friends had begged him not to expose himself unduly, but they had done so for the last twenty years. Had the King not given almost the same answer to M. de Broqueville towards the end of the War: "Our last hour is marked by God. I am in command and

must give the example." Prince Leopold's education had been completed for a long time, and he had already been associated with his father's work for several years.

All we know of King Albert's spiritual life indicates that through his many trials his serenity remained undisturbed. There was no weight upon his conscience, no reason for regret or remorse. "Readiness" had not come to him, it was his normal state of mind.

It must be added that, while some of his words may be taken as premonitions, others show a remarkable light-heartedness. "Did you ever think of the dangers of driving?" he used to say. "Do you realize that, in a country like England, the motor-car kills more people in a year than the French guillotine did during the Terror?" And again: "I take every precaution. I have given up more climbs than most Alpinists."

When this is taken into consideration, it is impossible to connect the Sovereign's remarks with the events of February 17th 1934, more than with those of any other day. Dramatic effect must be sacrificed to historic accuracy. The end came without justification. It was a clean break at a moment when the King's health and energy were unimpaired, when his prestige was supreme, and when he had had several recent opportunities of testing the unchallenged influence which he exerted on Belgian politics.

The adventure itself was almost commonplace. Since 1929 the King had taken a special interest in the Belgian Alpine Club founded two years before by Comte Xavier de Grunne. Many young Belgian alpinists, unable to go as far as Switzerland, followed the examples of some of their British, French and German colleagues, by practising their sport in their own country. Although rock climbing, even on a small scale, is never devoid of danger and presents many difficulties, an experienced mountaineer like the King could merely consider these ascents as an innocent exercise which helped him to keep in training. Even in the Ardennes, he had scaled rocks far more precipitous

puisse 1934 n'être pas aussi  
agitée qu'on le prédit, le monde  
doit pourtant même continuer à vivre  
En te souhaitant encore tout ce-  
qui, j'espère pour toi, je t'embrasse  
chaleureusement, bien chère Josephine  
et je reste

ton très dévoué frère

A. Clerc -

Et si si c'est pour dire  
ces mots-là, Monsieur l'Inspecteur,  
que je vous prie d'agréer mes  
sentiments les meilleurs et les  
plus respectueux.

A. Clerc

Y 8 juillet 1885

1. Extract from a letter addressed by Prince Albert, aged ten, to Inspector Braum.

*(By kind permission of M. Thomas Braum)*  
Above the last New Year wishes sent by King Albert to Princess Josephine.

than those among which he met his death, notably the famous *Rocher à Bayard* on the brink of the Meuse, close to Dinant.

When he left Laeken at noon, he merely wished to try his strength and agility among the rocks of the Meuse, as he might have done in a gymnasium. He was expected back at 6 p.m. to witness a bicycle race at the Brussels *Palais des Sports*. There was just time, after a particularly heavy morning's work, to devote about two hours to his favourite exercise. He equipped himself for the climb, as was his custom, and in order to spare time, took some provisions in his knapsack. He always enjoyed a picnic taken on the spot, after his exertions. Until the last, we find his unconquerable youth asserting itself. He left Laeken in the mood of a schoolboy leaving the form-room for the playground.

(2) Fifty years ago, the valley of the Meuse from the Belgian frontier to Liège was one of the finest in Northern Europe. It has been greatly spoilt since through the incursions of industry, deforestation, and the building of a number of villas used by prosperous Bruxellois and Liégeois during the holidays. There are, however, a few islets of well-preserved landscape left. One of these may be found east of Namur, at Marche-les-Dames, and is well known all over Belgium for the chalk cliffs riddled with crows' nests which rise, on the left bank, to a height of about eighty feet, where they reach a plateau close to the village of Boninne.

At the foot of the rocky hill, on the side of the road from Namur to Liège which follows the winding valley, stands a small chapel known as *le Vieux Bon Dieu*; on the other bank is the castle of Brumagne, the property of Baron Carton de Wiart. This spot was familiar to the King through his excursions with the members of the Alpine Club and his visits to Brumagne. It had been quite recently preserved by law and afforded one of the most picturesque landscapes of the Meuse within easy reach of Brussels.

Van Dyck, the faithful servant who had accompanied the Royal Family everywhere for thirty-three years and who was blindly devoted to his master, was his only companion.

They left the car at Boninne and, descending the slope, soon reached the foot of a needle called the Inaccessible. After some practice among the rocks, the King without breaking his fast, made again for Boninne across the wood at 2.30 p.m. A quarter of an hour later, as he was almost on the plateau, realizing that he had still some time to spend, he ordered Van Dyck to wait for him as he wished to make the most of his afternoon: "Follow the path for another fifty yards," he said, "I am going back to the foot of the rocks to make another climb. If I feel in good form I shall take the difficult way up, if I do not, I shall take the easy one. I shall join you in an hour."

Van Dyck saw his master walking rapidly towards the *Roche du Bon Dieu* and, following his instructions, awaited his return. At the appointed time, the King did not reappear. Knowing the Sovereign's punctual habits and his engagement for the evening, he became alarmed, but did not wish to leave his post. After waiting another hour, however, towards five o'clock, he walked in the direction followed by the King and called out for him. Unable to find his way through the thicket and crumbling rocks in the falling darkness, he hastened back towards Boninne in the hope that his master might have rejoined the car by another path. He found the door locked. The driver of a lorry which had stopped nearby declared that he had seen no one.

It was by now six o'clock, the time at which the King was expected in Brussels. Van Dyck asked the driver to accompany him and enlisted the services of two woodcutters who borrowed lanterns from Boninne. The woodcutters acting as guides, they soon reached the foot of the cliffs and the road in the valley which follows the railway.

They questioned the man at the level crossing, who had seen nothing.

After returning to the foot of the rocks and calling again, Van Dyck felt obliged to warn the Palace by telephone at 7 p.m. Captain Jacques, the King's *officier d'ordonnance*, left at once. At Laeken, it was decided not to tell the Queen, in order to spare her if possible a useless anxiety. Comte Xavier de Grunne, however, was warned at once and, at his suggestion, it was decided that he should take with him the King's doctor and friend, Professor Nolf. This involved another delay and the Count was only able to leave Brussels at 8.30.

(3) Comte de Grunne's being the fullest account given of the search which followed, it must be reproduced here in its entirety:

"At 9.45, we arrived on the spot where we found Captain Jacques searching along the road, at the foot of the cliffs with two gendarmes. But he did not know the lie of the ground and the habits of climbers, and was at a loss how to direct the search. Van Dyck had just left with the chauffeur for Boninne. Had there been a misunderstanding, and had not the Sovereign returned straight to the car?

"His presence being indispensable to pursue our quest, we awaited him impatiently, examining meanwhile without much hope of success the neighbourhood of the *Inaccessible*.

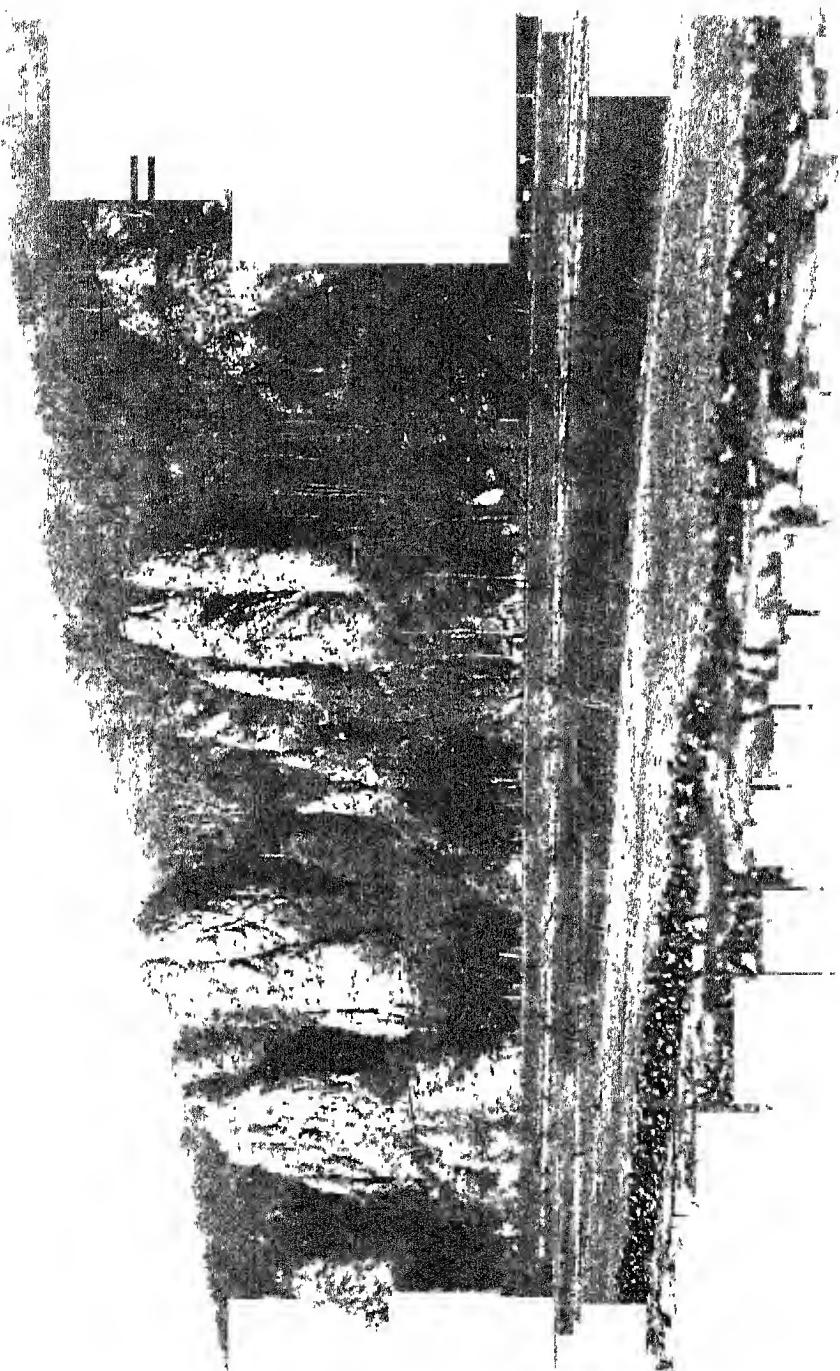
"10.30 p.m. His Majesty's valet returned at last and his explanations allowed us to localize our search to a certain extent. I decided at once to begin a systematic exploration of the cliffs, unhappily intricate, of the *Roche du Bon Dieu*, which the King had frequently scaled in my company. While Captain Jacques, Dr. Nolf, and Baron Carton de Wiart (who had just joined us) examined with small electric torches the base of the rocks and all accessible places, I made again the usual climbs. If an accident had occurred the body could have been held up in one of these crevasses which the Alpinists call chimneys and which they

use in their climbs. There is a large chimney, six feet wide and twenty feet deep, in the cliff overlooking the Meuse. It is called *Cheminée Louise*. On several occasions, the King had followed it with me and with others. I climbed through it looking in every direction with my torch. It took me a long time, for both hands are necessary for climbing, and it is difficult to use the torch under such circumstances. I finished the climb with no result. I went down on the other side, along a slope covered with dead leaves, walking close to the rocky wall in order to examine it to a distance of about fifty feet. I could not imagine that a body falling from the crest could roll any further on such ground. This was an error as will be seen later.

"I joined my companions, whose search had been equally fruitless. It was then 11.15 p.m. We began the same investigations on the left side of the cliff with no better success. At 12.15, our anxiety became unbearable. We decided to take new measures and to ask for help. Five of our best climbers capable of exploring the most difficult rocks were to be warned by telephone and brought back in a car in order to examine the ground. While the chauffeur went to Namur bearing this telephone message, we resumed our search, this time round another cliff less frequented, but here again it was in vain.

"1.30 a.m. While waiting for the arrival of the alpinists, MM. Nolf and Carton de Wiart with Captain Jacques walked through the undergrowth in all directions, further from the rocks; it was possible to imagine that a wounded man might drag himself along for a certain distance before losing consciousness. The gendarmes and two foresters helped them. As for me, I examined in another cliff a last chimney which I had partly climbed with the King two years previously. Had he made an attempt in that direction?

"1.55 a.m. I came back to the road, feeling completely exhausted. These night climbs, pursued for four hours, in growing anxiety had worn me out. All these efforts suddenly



16. The rocks of Marche-les-Dames. ("The rock where the accident occurred is the second from the right, above the chapel.)      (*By kind permission of Comte Aurore de Gramme*)

appeared useless. At that moment, in answer to a call from Baron Carton de Wiart, Captain Jacques, also driven to despair, was descending the slope, covered with leaves behind the *Roche du Bon Dieu*, which I had followed after exploring the *Cheminée Louise*, but instead of remaining at a distance of fifty feet from the rocks, he kept to the middle of the slope. His electric torch was almost extinguished. At a distance of about forty yards from the road, he tripped on a rope and saw that it was attached to a body. He cried out. We rushed toward him, and, by the light of our torches, we saw, lying on his back with hands outstretched as if to seize some support the body of the man who had been our Chief during the last twenty-five years. The Knight-King around whom the defenders of Belgium had ranged themselves in 1914, and who had led our independent country to her centenary, was lying on the ground soaked in his blood, like one of the dead in the Great War. A large wound could be seen on the right side of the skull, which had been broken by an impact which must have caused instant death. . . .”

(1) For a week life in Belgium was completely suspended. No important commercial transaction took place, and the activity of the nation was paralysed as if the source of her life had dried up. The effect of the news can only be compared with the commotion provoked by the German ultimatum of August 1914. It seemed for a moment as if the end of the hero's career had brought with it the final shattering of all that was noble and honourable in human civilization.

What made the King's funeral a unique experience for those who witnessed it, was not the glamour of mournful pageantry, the steps of the palace covered with flowers, the booming of guns, the tolling of bells, the presence of foreign Princes, of Generals, Bishops, Ministers and Magistrates in brilliant robes and uniforms, not even the march past of 40,000 ex-Service men, with their flags lowered in

mourning for a last salute. It was the hush of the crowd, the mark of awe and sorrow even on the faces of children, the women falling on their knees as the gun-carriage approached, bearing the lost leader to his last resting-place, and some stray remarks such as that of the old man who was heard to whisper: "*Au revoir, Albert.*"

"This funeral," wrote one of the King's ex-secretaries, "was an unheard of plebiscite in which he would perhaps not have believed while he lived. If he had only known; if he had always realized the enormous power of his ascendancy and that his people would have followed him anywhere, had they been only able to keep him at their head."

The echo of the tragedy was heard throughout the world, and everywhere—in London, in Paris, in the United States—people vaguely felt that the man who had disappeared had stood for something which they could not define, but which they felt to be their most precious possession.

It would be easy to fill a volume with the sincere and eloquent tributes paid to King Albert by all races and all parties, in all languages. One of them at least is worth mentioning here because, strangely enough, it comes from a people who, blinded by war prejudice, had poured contemptuously on the Sovereign who had stood in their way: "This man," wrote the *Berliner Tageblatt* on February 19th, "was for Belgium during the Great War the symbol of resistance. . . . He filled this part from the beginning, from the moment he decided to oppose the passage of the German Army. He always played it without useless gestures, showing himself in the front trenches at the peril of his life, always simple, a man of few words. . . . Thus he returned to his Capital, a man of duty, scorning declamation, with a deep feeling for what made his people happy, peace, order and justice. . . . The death of King Albert is a loss for the whole of Europe. In international affairs, he worked everywhere, and more particularly in Paris, for the restoration of peace. In this critical moment in the

struggle for a European order, Europe loses the hand of a guide, Albert the Good."

(5) The sorrow which crushed the nation was not fruitless. The Sovereign who had worked so hard to smooth difficulties and divisions during his life, brought his people closer together through his death than they had ever been for the last fifteen years. It was more than the sentimental impulse which prompts men to join hands when struck by the same grief. It was the realization that the King had been right throughout, in his tenacity, in his moderation, in his scrupulous respect for legality. It was the resolution taken before his grave to strive to reach the goal which he had set before their eyes, and complete, as far as it lay in their power, the work which he had begun.

The awaking came, on February 23rd, when a young man who had borne the heaviest grief, resolutely assumed the leadership of the nation. Most of his father's principles were reasserted in a firm voice during his Accession Speech. There was the same insistence on the responsibility of Kingship, the adaptability of the Constitution and, above all, the personal devotion of the King and his family to their people. The oath was "a solemn engagement which seals a pact of mutual confidence between the Sovereign and the Nation." When Leopold III exclaimed with an unmistakable ring of sincerity: "I give myself wholly to Belgium," the bonds which had for a few days been severed between the people and their Sovereign were renewed. These were the same principles uttered in a different way, the same feelings, expressed in a new voice. And the resolution taken in the days of sorrow appeared now more practicable since, through his death, the great King they mourned had given them a new leader, a son whom he had brought up in the same belief and in the respect of the same ideal. The unanimous acclamations which followed this declaration of faith, renewed the

tradition in more ways than can be divined. King Albert was still at the head of his people.

(6) In his dedication of the *Idylls of the King*, published in 1862, Tennyson declares that the Prince Consort seems to him:

Scarce other than my own ideal knight,  
Who reverenced his conscience as his king,  
Whose glory was, redressing human wrong;  
Who spake no slander, no, nor listen'd to it;  
Who loved one only and who clave to her.

Such comparisons may appear far-fetched and are not always historically sound. Mediæval knights were somewhat different from Tennyson's idyllic heroes, and modern princes are only exceptionally given the opportunity of displaying to the full the qualities or defects of their character. The poet's lines retain, nevertheless, a lasting value, because they describe features which all people, in all times, love to find in their leaders:

We know him now; all narrow jealousies  
Are silent, and we see him as he moved,  
How modest, kindly, all-accomplish'd, wise,  
With what sublime repression of himself . . .  
Wearing the white flower of a blameless life,  
Before a thousand peering littlenesses,  
In that fierce light which beats upon a throne  
And blackens every blot: for where is he,  
Who dares foreshadow for an only son  
A lovelier life, a more unstain'd, than his?

This homage was paid to the nephew of Leopold I, "Albert the Good." What name shall be given to his grandson?

When all is said, it is neither through his wisdom, his courage, his sense of duty, his self-sacrifice, his broad-mindedness, nor even his goodness, that he will be remembered. In other times, one or other of these features of his character might have overshadowed the others, but Albert

of Belgium arose at a crucial period of the history of mankind, at a moment when a choice had to be made between Law and Force, in civil and international relations, when a democratic representative Government had to become a reality or give way to some cruder régime, and when peace had to be secured through the common will of nations or to be sacrificed to the ambition of a dominating power. As a faithful servant of the Constitution and of international treaties, King Albert gave his answer and, by giving it, nearly lost his crown and ruined his land. All his intelligence, energy and moral virtue were dedicated to this main purpose. He was no doubt better, braver and wiser than many princes who were called good, brave and wise, but his loyalty outshone his other virtues. He was as good as his word and fearless, wise and truly great in keeping it. He deserves the finest title which can be bestowed on any leader at a time when justice and individual freedom are so sorely tried: Defender of Right.

No one can say whether his cause will ultimately triumph and the New Order prevail. King Albert may be remembered some day as one of the first or one of the last of its champions, but whatever the future has in store for European civilization, no further confusion is henceforth possible. When the great turning came, he stood at the cross-roads and pointed the way.



## APPENDIX I

### DRAFTS OF THE BELGIAN ANSWER TO THE GERMAN ULTIMATUM PREPARED DURING THE NIGHT OF AUGUST THE 2ND 1914

#### *First Draft*

Par sa note du . . . le Gouvernement allemand a fait connaître que d'après des nouvelles stûes les forces françaises auraient l'intention de marcher sur la Meuse par Givet et Namur et que la Belgique malgré sa meilleure volonté ne sera pas en mesure de repousser sans secours une marche en avant française. Ceci imposerait au Gouvernement allemand l'obligation de prévenir cette attaque et de violer le territoire belge. Dans ces conditions, l'Allemagne propose au Gouvernement du Roi de prendre vis-à-vis d'elle une attitude amicale et elle s'engage au moment de la paix à garantir le Royaume et ses possessions dans toute leur étendue.

Cette note a provoqué auprès du Gouvernement du Roi la plus pénible émotion. Les renseignements qu'elle contient sur la marche des armées françaises est en contradiction avec les déclarations solennelles du Gouvernement de la République qui nous ont été confirmées par le Gouvernement de S.M. Britannique.

D'ailleurs si, contrairement à son attente, cette agression se produisait, l'Armée dont le Gou-

#### *Second Draft*

Par sa note du . . . le Gouvernement allemand . . .

Cette note a provoqué chez le Gouvernement du Roi un profond et douloureux étonnement.

Les intentions qu'elle attribue au Gouvernement français sont en contradiction avec les déclarations formelles du Gouvernement de la République.

D'ailleurs si, contrairement à notre attente, une violation de la neutralité belge venait à être

vernement dispose lui permettrait de repousser l'agression et de remplir ses devoirs internationaux. Les traités de 1839, dont la Prusse est signataire, en consacrant l'indépendance et la neutralité de la Belgique, lui ont assuré dans le droit public une existence qui garantit à la fois son propre bonheur et la sécurité des autres états. Ce traité porte "la Belgique formera un Etat indépendant et perpétuellement neutre." La Belgique a rempli ses obligations internationales, elle a accompli ses devoirs dans un esprit de stricte impartialité, elle n'a négligé aucun sacrifice pour maintenir et faire respecter sa neutralité. Cette violation projetée de notre territoire par une Puissance garante de notre neutralité constituerait un attentat au droit des gens qu'aucune raison militaire ne saurait justifier. Les plans de campagne doivent être dirigés uniquement contre l'ennemi et non servir de prétexte pour attaquer. L'atteinte qui y serait portée violation éclatait<sup>1</sup> des promesses faites et répétées solennellement au Reichstag par le Secrétaire d'Etat et par le représentant de l'Empereur contrasterait si étrangement avec la loyauté de S.M. Impériale et de son Gouvernement que le Gouvernement du Roi espère encore qu'elle ne sera pas perpétrée.

Mais si son espoir était déçu le Gouvernement du Roi est

commise par la France, la Belgique remplirait tous ses devoirs internationaux et son armée opposerait à l'invasion la plus vigoureuse résistance.

Les traités de 1839, confirmés par les traités de 1870, consacrent l'indépendance et la neutralité de la Belgique sous la garantie des Puissances et notamment du Gouvernement de S.M. le Roi de Prusse.

La Belgique a toujours été fidèle à ses obligations internationales. Elle a accompli ses devoirs dans un esprit de loyale impartialité. Elle n'a négligé aucun effort pour maintenir et faire respecter sa neutralité.

L'atteinte à l'indépendance dont la menace le Gouvernement allemand constituerait une flagrante violation du droit des gens. Aucun intérêt stratégique ne justifie la violation du Droit.

Le Gouvernement belge en acceptant les propositions qui lui sont faites sacrifierait l'honneur de la Nation en même temps qu'il trahirait ses devoirs vis-à-vis de l'Europe.

Conscient du rôle que la Belgique joue depuis plus de 80 ans dans la civilisation du monde, il se refuse à croire que le respect de son indépendance ne puisse être assuré qu'au prix de l'abandon de son territoire.

Si cet espoir était déçu, le

<sup>1</sup> Ought to read : "L'atteinte qui serait portée à la neutralité belge constituerait une violation, etc. . . . et contrasterait. . . .

formellement décidé à repousser par tous les moyens en son pouvoir l'atteinte portée à sa neutralité et il rappelle qu'en vertu de l'article 10 de la Convention de La Haye de 1907 concernant les droits et les devoirs des Personnes neutres en cas de guerre sur terre, ne peut être considéré comme un acte hostile le fait par une Puissance neutre de repousser même par la force les atteintes à sa neutralité.

Gouvernement belge est fermement décidé à repousser par tous moyens en son pouvoir toute atteinte à son droit.

*(Published by kind permission of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)*

## APPENDIX II

### LETTER OF PRINCE ALBERT (AGED 10) TO INSPECTOR BRAUN *(Translation)*

MONSIEUR L'INSPECTEUR,

I hear from M. Godefroid that you express the wish to receive a letter from me in order to obtain an idea of my knowledge of the French language.

I am most grateful to you for the interest which you are taking in my studies and I thank you with all my heart. I should be so pleased to deserve your approval! It would be a great encouragement in my work.

You were once kind enough to watch over one of my lessons in my school-room at Brussels; I was still very small, for I was only six years old; in spite of that I remember very well your visit and I have preserved as a good souvenir the beautiful book that you gave me on this occasion.

My professor told me that you came from Germany, the country of my dear Mamam, to teach in Belgium; you have rendered great services to our country in preparing a large number of books for the instruction of the young; it is in one of these books that I learned to read and write so easily and so quickly; these were the lessons I enjoyed most, because I could see my progress every day.

It is for all these reasons, M. l'Inspecteur, that I beg you to accept the expression of my best and most respectful feelings.

ALBERT.

*July 8th, 1885.*

*(By kind permission of M. Thomas Braun.)*

### APPENDIX III

#### LETTER FROM KING ALBERT TO PRESIDENT WILSON *(Translation)*

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I recommend to Your Excellency's kindness the Mission which will bring you this letter. Its members will express to you the feelings of sympathy and enthusiastic admiration with which my people and my Government have greeted the resolutions which you have so wisely taken. They will also tell you how the glorious and prominent part which the United States have assumed has confirmed the confidence which the Belgian Nation has never ceased to have in American love of justice and freedom.

The great American nation has been particularly moved by the unjust violences inflicted upon Belgium. She has sympathized with the distress of my subjects, under the yoke of the enemy, and succoured them with unprecedented generosity. I am happy to have this opportunity of renewing to Your Excellency the expression of gratitude which my country owes you and of the firm hope entertained by Belgium that, on the day of legitimate reparations which will be so much hastened by America's action, she will receive full and entire justice.

My Government has chosen for its spokesmen to Your Excellency two distinguished men who, through their past services, have gained increased confidence: Baron Moncheur, who was for eight years my representative at Washington, and Lieutenant-Général Leclercq who has won esteem through a long military career.

I very much hope that you will trust their words, more particularly when they assure you of my good wishes for the happiness and prosperity of the United States of America, and of my faithful and most sincere friendship.

ALBERT.

LA PANNE,  
May 21st 1917.

*(Published by kind permission of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)*

## APPENDIX IV

### CLASSIFIED LIST OF BOOKS RETURNED TO THE ROYAL LIBRARY AT LAEKEN FROM NOVEMBER 15TH, 1933, TO FEBRUARY 18TH, 1934

#### 1. Travels—Geography

- GABRIEL FAURÉ, "Aux Lacs Italiens." 1922.  
RAOUL BLANCHARD, "La Corse." 1926.  
ARNOLD LUNN, "A History of Ski-ing." 1927.  
PIRRO MARCONI, "Agrigento." 1929.  
J. J. SCHÄTZ, "Wunder der Alpen." 1929.  
JACQUES HELLER, "Nord—Récit de l'Arctique." 1928.  
MAURICE LE GLAY, "Récits Marocains de la Plaine et des Monts." 1920.  
PRINCE SIXTE DE BOURBON et COMTE HECTOR DE BÉARN, "Au Coeur du Grand Désert" (*Journal de la Mission Alger-Tchad*). 1931.  
ROLAND DORGELÈS, "Entre le Ciel et l'Eau." 1931.  
PAUL MORAND, "Londres." 1933.  
PIERRE DAYE, "Beaux Jours du Pacifique." 1931.  
VAN LOON, "Geography." 1932.  
PRINCE SIXTE DE BOURBON, "Comte de Chambord: Voyage en Italie." 1933.

#### 2. Colonization—Congo

- BERTHE GEORGES-GAULIS, "La France au Maroc." 1919.  
DUC DE NEMOURS, "Madagascar et ses Richesses." 1930.  
REGINAL KANN, "Le Protectorat Marocain." 1921.  
MARCEL OLIVIER, "Six ans de politique sociale à Madagascar." 1931.  
LÉON LEHURAUX, "Au Sahara avec le Commandant Charlet, 1911-1913." 1932.  
GABRIEL HANOTAUX, "Pour l'Empire Colonial Français." 1935.  
PIERRE LYAUTHEY, "L'Empire Colonial Français." 1931.  
J. M. JADOT, "Blancs et Noirs au Congo Belge." 1929.  
ROBERT P. PFLIEGER, "Vers les Uéléz par la voie du Nil." 1929.  
BAILLEY WILLIS, "Living Africa." 1930.  
LORD OLIVIER, "White Capital and Coloured Labour." 1929.

*3. Modern Problems*

- H. G. WELLS, "The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind." 1932.
- EUGÈNE PITTARD, "Les Races et l'Historie." 1924.
- G. FERRERO, "Le Génie Latin et le Monde Moderne." 1917.
- H. MASSIS, "Défense de l'Occident." 1927.
- F. STROWSKI, "L'Homme Moderne." 1931.
- J. CAILLAUX, "Où va la France? Où va l'Europe?" 1922.
- PIERRE DAYE, "L'Europe en Morceaux." 1932.
- ÉDOUARD HERRIOT, "Europe." 1930.
- FRANCIS DELAISI, "Les Deux Europes." 1929.
- FRANCIS DELAISI, "Les Contradictions du Monde Moderne." 1925.
- GRAF CARLO SFORZA, "Die scindlichen Brüder—Inventur der europäischen Problemen" (Translation). 1933.
- G. FERRERO, "La Fin des Aventures—Guerre et Paix" (Translation). 1931.
- G. FERRERO, "Les Deux Vérités" (Translation). 1933.
- F. SIEBURG, "Dieu est-il français?" (Translation). 1930.
- ELLA WINTER, "Red Virtus."
- ROOSEVELT, "Regards en Avant" (Translation).
- SUAREZ, "Les Hommes Malades de la Paix.
- MALRAUX, "La Condition Humaine." 1933.
- FR. MAURIAC, "Dieu et Mannmon." 1933.
- G. DUHAMEL, "Scènes de la vie future."
- P. VALÉRY, "Regards sur le monde actuel."
- ALDOUS HUXLEY, "Brave New World."
- ISAIAH BOWMAN, "Le Monde nouveau." 1932.
- TH. MARBURG, "Development of the League of Nations Idea." 1932.
- DAVID DAVIES, "The Problem of the Twentieth Century." 1930.
- DONALD MARCELLUS A. R. VON REDLICH, "World Problems." 1932.

*4. Italy and Fascism*

- L. VILLARI, "Italy." 1929.
- F. L. FERRARI, "Le Régime Fasciste Italien." 1928.
- MAURICE BEDEL, "Fascisme—An VII." 1929.
- GAETANO SALVEMINI, "La Terreur Fasciste, 1922–1926." 1929.
- EMIL LUDWIG, "Entretiens avec Mussolini" (Translation). 1932.
- MUSSOLINI, "Le Fascisme—Doctrine, Institutions." 1933.
- COMTE SFORZA, "Dictateurs et Dictatures de l'Après-Guerre." 1931.
- MARGUERITE G. SARFATTI, "Mussolini, l'Homme et le Chef." 1927.

*5. Russia and Sovietism*

- BERDAEFF, "Problème du Communisme."
- KNICKERBOCKER, "Der rote Handel droht" (Translation). 1931.
- HENRI BÉRAUD, "Ce que j'ai vu à Moscou." 1925.
- A. GOROVTEFF, "Les Révolutions." 1930.
- GEORGE SOLOMON, "Parmi les Maîtres Rouges." 1930.
- KARL KAUTSKY, "Le Bolchévisme dans l'Impasse" (Translation). 1931.
- A. DE GOULÉVITCH, "Tsarisme et Révolution." 1931.
- PIERRE DOMINIQUE, "Oui, mais Moscou. . ." 1931.
- V. VERESSAIEV, "Guerre Civile." 1929.
- PANAÏT ISTRATI, "Vers l'autre flamme: Après 16 mois dans l'U.R.S.S." 1929.

*6. Hitlerism and the Jewish Question*

- OTTO FLAKE, "La Jeunesse Déchaînée" (Translation). 1932.
- FRANK MATZKE, "Jugend bekennt: So sind wir!" 1930.
- JACOB WASSERMANN, "Les Juifs de Zirndorf" (Translation). 1931.
- LION FEUCHTWANGER, "Der Jüdische Krieg." 1932.
- KNICKERBOCKER, "Germany."

*7. History—Biography*

- ANDRÉ MAUROIS, "Edouard VII et Son Temps." 1933.
- ALFRED DURAND, "Les Derniers Jours de la Cour Hova—L'Exil de la Reine Ranavalona." 1933.
- SIR EDWARD PARRY, "Queen Caroline." 1930.
- WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, "My Early Life." 1930.
- HAROLD NICOLSON, "Lord Carnock." 1930.
- HENRY J. SMITH, "J. P. Morgan, der Weltbankier." 1928.

*8. Memoirs concerning the War and After-War Periods*

- MARÉCHAL JOFFRE, "Mémoires." 1932.
- MARÉCHAL FOCH, "Mémoires." 1931.
- GEORGES SUAREZ, "La Vie Orgueilleuse de Clémenceau." 1930.
- GÉNÉRAL MORDACQ, "Le Ministère Clémenceau." 1930-1931.
- GÉNÉRAL MORDACQ, "Clémenceau au soir de sa vie." 1933.
- DR. GEORGES SAMNÉ, "Raymond Poincaré." 1933.
- BARON BEYENS, "Deux Années à Berlin, 1912-1914." 1931-1932.
- EMIL LUDWIG, "Guillaume II" (Translation). 1927.
- EMIL LUDWIG, "Bismarck" (Translation). 1929.

- CHANCELIER PRINCE DE BÜLOW, "Mémoires" (Translation). 1930-1931.  
STRESEMANN, "Vermächtnis." 1932-1933.  
G. E. R. GEDYE, "Heirs to the Hapsburgs." 1932.  
UNAMUNO, "Avant et Après la Révolution."  
H.R.H. PRINCESS LUDWIG FERDINAND OF BULGARIA, "Through Four Revolutions." 1933.  
WANG KING KY, "La Voix de la Chine." 1929.

#### 9. *Economic and Social Questions*

- LORD MELCHETT, "Modern Money." 1929.  
M. A. HEILPERIN, "Le Problème Monétaire d'Après-Guerre et sa Solution en Pologne, en Autriche et en Tchécoslovaquie." 1931.  
JACQUES DUBOIN, "La Grande Relève des Hommes par la Machine." 1932.  
G. BARNICH, "La Politique de la Vie Chère et de l'Appauvrissement." 1925.  
A. DELATTRE, "La Lutte Contre le Grisou en Belgique." 1931.  
H. HEYMAN, "L'Enseignement Technique en Belgique." 1930.

#### 10. *Science and Philosophy*

- ABRAHAM FLEXNER, "Universities—American, English, German." 1930.  
M. MAETERLINCK, "La Grande Loi." 1933.  
P. CHANLAINE, "Les Horizons de la Science." 1928.  
GRAND DUC ALEXANDRE DE RUSSIE, "Se Connaitre." 1927.

#### 11. *Literary Criticism*

- LÉON DAUDET, "Ecrivains et Artistes." 1927.  
LÉON DAUDET, "Etudes et Milieux Littéraires." 1927.  
LÉON DAUDET, "Paris Vécu." 1929.  
HENRI BÉRAUD, "Le Flâneur Salarié." 1927.  
JULES DESTRÉE, "Le Mystère Quotidien (Réflexions, Souvenirs)." 1927.

#### 12. *Fiction*

- EMILY BRONTË, "Les Hauts de Hurle-Vents" (Translation). 1929.  
SINCLAIR LEWIS, "Dodsworth." 1929.  
SINCLAIR LEWIS, "Ann Vickers." 1933.  
UPTON SINCLAIR, "Samuel le Chercheur" (Translation). 1931.

- UPTON SINCLAIR, "American Outpost." 1932.
- H. G. WELLS, "Anticipations" (Translation). 1904.
- H. G. WELLS, "Effrois et Fantasmagories" (Translation). 1921.
- H. G. WELLS, "La Recherche Magnifique" (Translation). 1927.
- H. G. WELLS, "La Dictature de Mr. Parham" (Translation). 1930.
- ALDOUS HUXLEY, "Little Mexican and other Stories." 1929.
- AXEL MUNTHE, "The Story of Sau Michele." 1930.
- GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO, "Notturno." 1921.
- MASSIMO BONTEMPELLI, "Le Fils de Deux Mères" (Translation). 1930.
- MASSIMO BONTEMPELLI, "La Vie et la Mort d'Aria et de ses deux enfants" (Translation). 1932.
- FAUSTA TERNI-CAIALENTE, "Natalie" (Translation). 1932.
- VICENTE BLASCO IBANEZ, "L'Intrus" (Translation). 1924.
- ERICH KAESTNER, "Fabien" (Translation). 1932.
- VIKI BAUM, "Grand Hôtel" (Translation). 1932.
- GERHARD BOHLMANN, "Die Silberne Jungfrau." 1932.
- HEINRICH MANN, "Professeur Uurat (L'Ange Bleu)." (Translation). 1932.
- JOSEPH ROTI, "Radetzky Marsch." 1932.
- ILYA EMRENBURG, "10 C.V." (Translation). 1930.
- ILYA EMRENBURG, "La Rue de Moscou" (Translation). 1930.
- ILYA EMRENBURG, "Le Deuxième Jour de la Création" (Translation). 1931.
- PANAÎT ISTRATI, "La Maison Thüringer" (Translation). 1933.
- L. DAUDET, "Les Bacchantes." 1931.
- R. FERNANDEZ, "Le Pari." 1932.
- DRIEU LA ROCHELLE, "Drôle de Voyage." 1933.
- ED. PISSON, "Parti de Liverpool. . ." 1932.
- GUY MAZELINE, "Les Loups." 1932.
- FR. MAURIAC, "Le Nœud de Vipères." 1932.
- FR. MAURIAC, "Le Mystère Frontenac." 1933.
- FR. MAURIAC, "Commencements d'une Vie." 1932.
- HENRY BORDEAUX, "Amitiés Étrangères." 1933.
- PAUL HENRY-BORDEAUX, "Antaram de Trébisondre." 1930.
- PAUL HENRY-BORDEAUX, "Fantômes d'Ecosse." 1932.
- ANDRÉ MAUROIS, "Cercle de Famille." 1932.
- PEARL S. BUCK, "La Terre Chinoise: Les Fils de Wang-Lung" (Translation). 1932.
- PEARL S. BUCK, "Vent d'Est et Vent d'Ouest" (Translation). 1933.

The List includes also about fifteen titles of novels written in French and Flemish by Belgian authors.

## APPENDIX V

A few months after King Albert's death, M. Emile Vandervelde, who was his Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1925–1926, published the following letter in which the Sovereign advises him on the attitude which Belgium should take concerning the question of the Chinese Concessions:

“LAEKEN, November 1926.

“MY DEAR MINISTER,

“The Chinese Government, by denouncing the Sino-Belgian Treaty of 1865, has placed in the forefront the solution of a difficult question; it concerns the relations of Western Countries with the people representing the third of the total population of the world, and which has behind it, as a nation, thirty centuries of civilization.

“At the very beginning of a struggle between two Continents which may last for centuries, circumstances give Belgium the initiative.

“I am well aware of the consideration and respect which we owe to great Powers which have recently been our Allies and with which we have so many interests in common; but I ask myself: Must the Belgians go as far as to share the unpopularity and even the hatred which the abuse of force is accumulating unceasingly in the Far East. Must they suffer from this boycott which the Chinese are expert at practising ?

“I am deeply convinced that we must utter words of peace, equity and disinterestedness. Belgium would thus increase her prestige and serve her own interest.

“For nearly a century, the great Powers have followed a distinctly imperialistic policy towards China, and their soldiers and sailors have frequently interfered in order to develop their trade. The principal episodes of this violent struggle are the Opium War undertaken by England in 1839, which ended by the cession of Hong Kong; the seizure of Canton and Tientsin in 1857 which brought about the opening of numerous ports and the establishment of embassies and legations; the occupation of Pekin in 1860 which compelled China to give up to Russia the territories of the Amur

of and the Usuri and to open up Mongolia; and in 1900, the collective intervention of the Powers after the Boxer Rising.

"This is a heavy heritage of war to which Belgium has not been a party.

"Instability has reached its climax in the old Celestial Empire. The deadly shooting at Shanghai, the bombardment by cruisers of towns and villages have exasperated the hatred of foreigners of which *The Times* has quite recently emphasized the danger.

"It is difficult to foretell the future, but one thing is certain: unilateral treaties have become obsolete. Easterners refuse to accept them; since the war of 1914-1918, they no longer believe in the superiority of our civilization to their own.

"On the other hand, the Chinese are armed, and since there is no power (apart from Japan which is absorbed in the ungrateful task of conciliating 35 million Koreans, annexed in 1894) which could afford the expenses of an expedition capable of overcoming them, it will be found absolutely necessary to concede to them a large part of their claims. Would it not be useful and even advantageous for us to be the first to adopt a principle of equality and reciprocity which must eventually be unavoidably recognized?

"Besides, we have always benefited in our overseas trade from our total lack of imperialistic aims; we wish to inspire confidence and use this confidence in our competition with the great Powers which must necessarily inspire fear owing to their territorial ambitions."

(Reproduced in *Libre Belgique*, March 1st, 1935.)

## APPENDIX VI

Talking to M. de Paeuw in July 1930, King Albert mentioned certain rumours which had been spread on the morrow of Prince Baudouin's sudden death, and asked him to seize the first opportunity of contradicting these statements. "You must," he said, "help us to stop the calumnies which were circulated and which are still circulated regarding my brother's premature death. You see, M. le Directeur-Général, the higher we are placed the more we are exposed to mischievous gossip. Kings and Princes are even less free from it than others. Everything we do is looked at through magnifying glasses. The public cannot believe that we can live simply and that a Prince can die of a common illness as everyone else. Imaginations are stirred, tongues begin to wag, and invention is added to invention."

In order to comply with the late King's wishes, M. de Paeuw reproduced in his book, *Albert, Troisième Roi des Belges*, the series of letters, written in January 1891 by the Count of Flanders to Leopold II, showing conclusively that Prince Baudouin died of pneumonia, following a cold contracted in the course of his military duties.

For the same purpose it may be useful to publish here a series of official documents regarding the accidental death of King Albert, at Marche-les-Dames, on February 17th, 1934.

Two months after the news had reached this country, Colonel Graham Seton Hutchison thought fit to declare that the reports published concerning the manner in which King Albert met his death, were unbelievable; he further suggested that the Sovereign had been the victim of a political murder. Since Colonel Hutchison's conclusions are only based on certain contradictions in the first news published in the British Press and on a series of hypotheses unsupported by concrete evidence, they need not be discussed in a serious biography. The reader will find below a number of statements made by the Belgian judicial authorities who visited Marche-les-Dames a few hours after the accident, and by responsible ministers who endorsed their conclusions. If he has any knowledge of Colonel Hutchison's arguments, he will no doubt consider that the facts established by a judicial investigation carried out on the spot cannot be challenged by vague deductions based on discrepancies detected in hasty Press reports.

*A*

M. Janson, Minister of Justice, received the Delegates of the Press on Sunday, February 18th, at 6 o'clock, and read to them the report of the Magistrates (*Parquet*) of Namur concerning the accident which was the cause of the King's death:

"His Majesty was yesterday, at 3.30 p.m., at Boninne, accompanied by his valet Théophile Van Dyck. Having left his car, which he had driven himself, near the road of Marche-les-Dames, in order to explore certain rocks on the banks of the Meuse, His Majesty departed alone, for a rock called *Roche du Bon Dieu*, above the chapel situated by the railway line from Liège to Namur.

"The King had arranged to meet his valet again at about 5 p.m. Van Dyck, having reached the appointed place, awaited the Sovereign for a certain time and, not seeing him reappear, became anxious and sought him, calling repeatedly. His search having been fruitless, and darkness intervening, Van Dyck went, at about 7 p.m., into a café from which he telephoned to the gendarmerie of Namèche and warned the Palace in Brussels.

"Baron Jacques de Dixmude, the King's *officier d'ordonnance*, Dr. Nolf and Comte Xavier de Grunne, President of the Belgian Alpine Club, drove immediately to the spot in a car.

"A most careful search was undertaken and pursued in spite of the difficulties caused by the darkness and thickness of the undergrowth. The fact had also to be taken into account that the King, according to his plan, was to climb several points in succession. At 2 o'clock in the morning, Commandant Jacques de Dixmude caught his foot in a rope which lay on the ground, one end of which was attached to the body of His Majesty. This allowed those present to discover the appalling truth.

"His Majesty was lying lifeless, already in the rigidity of death, with a large and very deep wound at the top of the skull. The body of His Majesty was immediately carried to the road and laid in a car which conveyed it to the palace of Laeken.

"The *Procureur du Roi* of Namur was informed at 3.40 by the Captain of the Gendarmerie of Namur and, as soon as the *Juge d'Instruction* had been warned, the judicial authorities went immediately to the spot.

"By means of lamps they were able to trace the course followed by the body of His Majesty in its fatal fall.

"As early as 8 o'clock in the morning, with the help of experts and the assistance of Comte Xavier de Grunne, the authorities succeeded in defining the circumstances of the tragedy.

"His Majesty having made the ascent of a rocky point and having

reached its summit, where traces of his passage were distinctly visible, supported himself on a large block of stone, which by its volume must have appeared to him absolutely safe and well fixed to the rock. The block detached itself and carried away His Majesty in its fall. His Majesty was knocked against the side of the rock. It is at that spot where traces of blood were visible this morning, that His Majesty received the blow which caused his death.

"Rebounding immediately after the impact, the body fell along the slope and stopped fifty yards lower, scattering along its passage several objects: glasses, cap, sack, straps, which have been picked up by the police.

"This inquiry, together with the report made on the spot by Comte de Grunne and by the judicial expert, allowed the exact reconstitution of the phases of the tragic accident."

### B

Proclamation of the Belgian Government (*Moniteur Belge*), February 18th, 1934:

"The King is dead!

"At the dawn of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his reign, when the country which he had saved surrounded him with ever-increasing affection and respect, and relied more than ever on his calm and serene wisdom among the perils of the hour, *a terrible accident* deprives Belgium of the Chief of whom she was so proud. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister,

COMTE DE BROQUEVILLE.

BRUSSELS,

February 18th, 1934.

### C

Notification of the death of the King to the Legislative Chambers :  
Senate: *Compte-rendu analytique*, February 19th, 1934.

Chamber of Representatives: *Compte-rendu analytique*, February 19th, 1934.

Senate, under the Presidency of M. Digneffe.—Comte de Broqueville, Prime Minister, before the standing assembly, delivers, first in Flemish and then in French, the following speech:

"The Government has to fulfil the most painful of duties in announcing to the Senate the death of the King which occurred on

<sup>1</sup> Author's italics.

Saturday afternoon, as *the result of an accident* while he was indulging in his favourite sport among the rocks of Marche-les-Dames. . . .<sup>1</sup>

House of Representatives under the Presidency of M. Poncelet.

M. de Broqueville, Prime Minister, reads the same declaration which is reproduced in the *Compte-rendu analytique*.

### D

Ministry of National Defence—Order of the day, conveying to the Army the news of the death of King Albert.

The Minister of National Defence to all military authorities—Order of the Day:

“A terrible grief strikes the Nation.

“It is with unspeakable sorrow that I convey to the Army the news of the *accidental* death of His Majesty King Albert, our well-beloved King, at Marche-les-Dames on February 17th.”<sup>1</sup>

Minister of National Defence—A. DEVIZE,  
*Moniteur Belge*, February 18th, 1954.”

### E

Official Circular addressed by the Minister of the Interior to the Governors of the Provinces.

“I have had, Monsieur le Gouverneur, to inform you by telegram of the *accidental* death of our well-beloved King, on Saturday evening. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The Minister,

HUBERT PIERLOT.”

### F

Town of Brussels—Placard issued by the Burgomaster on February 18th:

“DEAR FELLOW-CITIZENS,

“I have the cruel duty of announcing tragic news to the population.

“The King died yesterday, the victim of a terrible *accident*.<sup>1</sup> The Nation will feel deeply this immense loss. . . .

The Burgomaster,

ADOLPHE MAX.”

BRUSSELS,  
February 18th, 1954.

<sup>1</sup> Author's italics

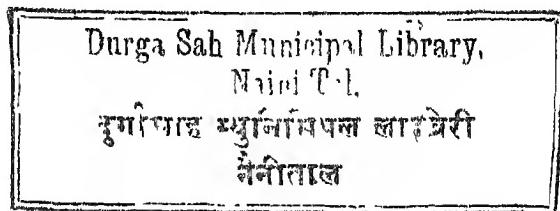
## G

*The Times, May 8th, 1934.*

*The Late King of the Belgians:* An unfounded statement.

SIR HERBERT SAMUEL asked whether the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had received any communication from the Belgian Embassy with regard to the late King of the Belgians and whether he had any statement to make on the matter.

SIR JOHN SIMON: Yes, sir, my attention has been rightly drawn to the statement alleged to have been made by Colonel G. S. Hutchison to the effect that the late King of the Belgians was murdered. I feel sure that the whole House will join me in regretting the pain and indignation that has been caused throughout Belgium by this unfounded and irresponsible statement.





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